THE WALLS OF BABYLON

AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF THE REVELATION TO JOHN

DAVID ARTHUR

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David Arthur

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He called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!”

—Rev 18:2

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Introduction

The Beating Heart Within

HISTORICAL INFLUENCE

Long a fount of our collective dreams and nightmares, the book of Revelation holds a central place within the Western imagination. As much or more than any other single source, this short document has furnished the basic materials from which our symbolic universe is constructed. The stereotypical image of heaven, for example—streets paved with gold, angels strumming harps, saints garbed in white robes, God sitting on his throne—is derived, in large part, from its word pictures. Within the religious life of the church, themes and phrases from Revelation provide a recurrent thread woven deeply into the fabric of liturgy and hymnody. Even in the secular world, Revelation's imagery reemerges in stock metaphors such as "the pearly gates," "cup of wrath," "Armageddon," "New Jerusalem," and "mark of the beast."

The scope of Revelation's influence is by no means confined to occasional figures of speech.[1] Many of the principal artistic monuments of Western civilization have been created under its spell. The tapestry of Angers, van Eyck's altarpiece at Ghent, Dürer's woodcuts, Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, the rose windows of Chartres, the words of Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, Bosch's paintings, the portals of Amiens and Notre Dame cathedrals, Romanesque murals at Civate, Berzé-La-Ville, and Taüll: all testify to the pervasive influence of the Apocalypse within Western art, music, and architecture. Many poets have also drawn on the raw evocative power of its imagery: Dante, Blake, Shelley, Spenser, Milton, Novalis, and Hölderlin all used Revelation as an archetype for their own literary visions, as have novelists and essayists such as Melville and Carlyle. Even scientists have not been immune to its allure. Newton and Priestly both wrote more extensively about Revelation's mysteries than about the physical sciences which they pioneered.

Though significant as expressions of culture and religion, these artifacts are but surface manifestations of a deeper and more pervasive influence. Revelation has decisively shaped the Western world view at its most fundamental level. Most notably, the concept of history as movement toward a goal—foundational to Western political theory—has been conditioned by biblical thought patterns mediated primarily through its agency.

Like all apocalyptic texts, Revelation is relentlessly future-oriented; the present acquires significance only as a gateway to the new age. History, within this perspective, is an inexorable progression toward a looming crescendo—a temporary, incomplete condition which will be fully resolved only in the eschaton. Consequently, for much of the last two thousand years Western civilization has existed in a state of prolonged anticipation, continually poised on the brink of an always approaching but ever elusive dawn. This sense of urgent expectancy, the recurrent intimation of a dramatic, swiftly approaching transformation, has deeply informed our understanding of human destiny, and is in no small part responsible for the dynamism and instability of Western institutions.

This characteristic outlook has typically taken the form of a teleological vision in which some social or religious ideal is gradually but inexorably realized after a prolonged period of struggle and setback. The earliest explicit scheme of this type was devised by a twelfth century Cistercian monk, Joachim of Fiore.[2] Based on the concept of the Trinity, Joachim divided world history into three epochs: an initial phase, dominated by the Old Testament Father; the present age, ruled over by the Son; and the coming age of the Holy Spirit, when humanity would at last enter into a state of perfect freedom and grace. In this way, Joachim transformed apocalyptic eschatology into a universal movement of three upward steps, culminating in spiritual completion.

The idea of a gradual historical unfolding, revived and variously revised by later Protestant thinkers, was eventually coupled with the optimism engendered by advances in science, technology, and geography. Speaking of the new emerging order, Francis Bacon declared that "entrance into the kingdom of heaven, where into none may enter except as a child" was now being tangibly realized in "the entrance into the kingdom of man, founded on the sciences."[3] Thus fusing eschatological expectation with the spirit of self-confident human enterprise, Bacon concocted the modern ideal of progress. Though later advocates abandoned the original theological framework of that concept, the underlying apocalyptic paradigm remained, manifest as the historical imperative driving the new enterprise forward.

Revelation has been especially prolific within the political realm, having directly or indirectly inspired dozens of revolutionary ideologies. Seen through an apocalyptic lens, the existing world order appears corrupt and

therefore in drastic need of renewal. Soon the current regime must implode in a paroxysm of violence, creating a void within which a new, perfected world order will arise. This basic paradigm, elaborated as needed to fit changing circumstances, has been used to justify and promote resistance movements throughout Western history.

Consciously or unconsciously, in forms both crude and sophisticated, a series of marginalized, disaffected, persecuted, or reformist groups have adopted the apocalyptic scheme. Even as early as the second century CE, Christian martyrs at Lyons, Vienne, and Scilli invoked Revelation as a rallying point in the struggle between the emerging church and the Roman Empire.[4] In the thirteenth century, radical Franciscans explicitly appealed to Revelation to justify their rejection of the Pope's ecclesiastical authority. Protestant revolutionaries later took up the cry and extended the scope of rebellion to include secular rulers. In northern Europe, Anabaptist leaders such as Hans Hut and Thomas Müntzer urged their followers to take up the sword and "annihilate all the godless," thereby preparing the way for Christ's imminent return and earthly reign.[5] As instruments of divine wrath, the pious were to imitate the four horsemen of the Apocalypse and mercilessly slaughter anyone who opposed them. During England's civil wars in the following century, radical sects such as the Diggers and the Fifth Monarchy Men likewise saw their struggle against the existing regime as a precursor to the coming millennium. In each case, the leaders of these movements identified the institutional structures of church or state with the reign of the Antichrist as depicted in Revelation.

During the ensuing upheavals of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, the apocalyptic typology was rationalized and historicized, eventually resulting in a political theory of revolution, as initially formulated by Locke, Babeuf, Engels, and Marx and later elaborated by Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, and others.[6] Though dialectical materialism now replaced the struggle between God and Satan as the driving force behind history, the perceived urgency and inevitability of the consummation remained undiminished.

The apocalyptic paradigm mediated through Revelation has had a transformative effect on individual psychology as well.[7] In addition to motivating millions of believers and imparting specific beliefs, hopes, and fears, apocalyptic ideology has entered into the very structure of the Western psyche through a process of transference. From the outset, some Christians took up the notion of an imminent appearance of God only to sublimate or internalize it. Jesus' remark, "the kingdom of God is within you,"[8] though ambiguous, was perhaps the first step in that direction, and in any case, was certainly understood that way by some Christians. The apostle Paul furthered this tendency by comparing the spiritual rebirth of the believer to the apocalyptic

renewal of the cosmos: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old things have passed away, behold, all is made new" (2 Cor 5:17). As time went on, the long awaited and deferred Kingdom of God was increasingly seen as an archetype or external counterpart to the inner devotional life. Revelation itself seemed to invite such an approach: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him" (3:20).

St. Augustine, who underwent a shattering conversion in his thirties, completed the process of internalization by rescripting the apocalyptic drama for the theater of the soul. Reading Revelation as an allegory of personal redemption, Augustine recast the events of the end time as phases of spiritual development. The cosmic convulsion predicted by John was realized in individual experience through conversion, understood as a radical self-transformation, leading from a state of sin and death to resurrection to a new life in the spirit.[9] Widely cited by later religious thinkers, Augustine's chronicle of struggle and triumph set the pattern for an extensive confessional literature, still popular in secular versions in our own time. More importantly, by internalizing the eschatological battle between good and evil, Augustine established a personality type, largely unique to the West, in which dynamic impulses dominate. Within that paradigm, the individual is seen not as the bearer of culture and tradition, as in ancient societies, but as an autonomous, goal-directed entity, moving through crisis and catharsis towards ultimate self-realization.

While Revelation's enduring impact on Western art, ideology, and personality is indisputable, it is also true that its direct influence has waned in proportion to the rise of the modern world view. Over the course of the last several centuries, the apocalyptic scenario has been absorbed and replaced by a series of increasingly abstract social, political, and philosophical constructs. In many instances, the reformulation of apocalyptic concepts has occurred without the conscious intent of those who achieved it. Thinkers such as Fichte, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud explicitly rejected their religious heritage, even as they perpetuated its underlying paradigms. In this way, the original impetus of apocalyptic eschatology has been progressively diverted and dissipated, even as its circle of influence has broadened.

Today Revelation's direct sway over Western thought and imagination is much diminished. Outside the narrow walls of fundamentalist Christianity, the notion of an imminent divine intrusion from the skies is no longer taken seriously. Instead of looking to the heavens for salvation, we now look to science and technology.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to suppose that a construct of such towering dimensions and widespread impact has vanished altogether. The book of Revelation still lingers in a hidden compartment of the Western psyche,

amid cobwebs, tattered trunks, forgotten mementoes, and other cultural debris. From that dim and dusty attic, the Apocalypse periodically emerges, ghost-like, to haunt its spiritual descendants. Though exorcized repeatedly by the apostles of Reason, it persists. Even a modest crisis or pervasive angst is sufficient to conjure it up again. The wraith retreats only to reappear, with redoubled force, in some new phantasmal guise. Glaring malevolently, it lurks on the periphery of thought, beckoning us toward a final reckoning for an ancient but still unresolved blood-debt.

WHO WAS "JOHN"?

The author of the Apocalypse identifies himself simply as "John" (1:4). He does not append a formal title to his name nor does he make any more than a passing reference to his personal circumstances. So perfunctory a claim is itself a matter of remark. In an age where religious texts were commonly attributed to an established authority figure—such as a founding father or legendary hero—the limited scope and contemporary location of John's self-identification is unusual. The absence of an appeal to ecclesiastical office or fictitious origin implies a self-evident status that does not require legitimization. Apparently John was a well-known personality among the churches of Asia Minor.

On that basis, one might assume that the question of authorship is well established. Unlike many ancient scriptures, attribution to a particular person is not in this instance a simplifying fiction for what is actually a collection of traditional materials. Revelation exhibits a uniform literary style and cogent pattern of thought. Its general historical and geographical context is unambiguous. Yet the answer to just who "John" was has eluded scholars from the early Christian era right down to the present.

The church has, of course, traditionally ascribed the book to the apostle John. This claim finds some support in patristic documents, which provide the earliest explicit references to Revelation. Writing sometime around 160 CE, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr—who lived for a time in one of the seven cities addressed by John—attributed the book to the apostle.[10] A few decades later, Irenaeus—then bishop of Lyons but native to Asia Minor—likewise affirmed the book's apostolic origin.[11] The church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian of Carthage both cited Revelation extensively in their works and followed their predecessors in attributing the book to the apostle John.[12] Thus our earliest witnesses, some with connections to the region where Revelation originated, unanimously point to John, son of Zebedee.

Nonetheless, there are solid reasons for doubting the reliability of this tradition. John himself speaks of the apostles as venerable figures of an age now past, whose deeds are foundational to the city of God (21:14; cf. Eph 2:20). More importantly, the author of Revelation displays no familiarity with the biographical facts of Jesus' career. The Christ known to John is a heavenly warrior with a sword protruding from his mouth (1:16). The earthly Jesus—the charismatic peasant who ate, drank, preached, and died in Judea—is a distant memory with whom he has no personal acquaintance. Finally, the mismatch between the presumed author and the canonical book is extreme: the apostle John was a simple, illiterate fisherman, whereas Revelation is the product of a powerful, erudite mind.

In view of these difficulties, several other Johns have been proposed as the author of the Apocalypse. Those nominated include John the Baptist, John the presbyter (a prominent figure in the early church), John Mark (one of Paul's companions), and a collective "John" comprised of the apostle's disciples. None of these conjectures is backed by substantive evidence, and none has secured wide acceptance.

Lacking a viable alternative, many modern scholars have reverted to a hypothesis first advanced in the mid-third century by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria: namely, that Revelation is attributable to "another John," otherwise unknown to history.[13] Then, as now, the name John (Greek: *Iōannēs*; Hebrew: *Yôḥānān*) was relatively common. This being the case, there is no particular reason why the John of Revelation must coincide with any one of the various Johns familiar to us from elsewhere in the New Testament.

The name itself is our only firm reference point for the author's identity; beyond that, we move rapidly into the realm of speculation. Nonetheless, some conjectures are credible. Since his book is addressed to seven churches in a circumscribed region of Asia Minor, we can assume that he was active there at the time of writing. His rough, idiosyncratic Greek syntax is not, however, that of a native speaker; instead he thinks and writes using characteristically Semitic linguistic constructions and phraseology. Very likely John originated in Palestine, a conjecture supported by his apparent familiarity with Jerusalem and with texts then available only in Hebrew or Aramaic. His profound knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, as well as his recurrent interest in questions regarding Jewish tradition and identity (e.g., 21:10; 3:9), indicate that he was a Jew by birth.

Though John's personal identity is obscure, his social identity is not. He was a prophet—the authorized spokesman of the risen Christ, commissioned to "prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings" (1:17– 19; 10:11). While John does not himself explicitly claim the title of prophet, his role is nonetheless implicit in the structure, style, and content of his book, as demonstrated by the recurrent use of oracular formulas such as

"thus says" [*tade legei*] and the prevalence of traditional prophetic genres such as vision reports and announcements of salvation or doom.[14] John receives divine commissions that are functionally analogous to the call narratives of the classical prophets[15] and repeatedly refers to his book as "prophecy" (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). His words and visions are mediated by the Spirit (1:10; 2:7; 4:2), allowing him to write directly on behalf of God and the exalted Christ, using the first person singular (e.g., 1:8; 3:15–21). Above all, John continuously draws upon the language and imagery of his biblical predecessors as a touchstone for his own message. As we shall see, these allusions are both pervasive and systematic; however, they derive not from imitation, but from a massive assumption of continuity. John understands himself, first and foremost, as a successor to a line of divinely designated spokesmen going back to the earliest period of Israel's history.[16] This, rather than apostolic credentials, is the real basis of his authority.

The surest path to understanding the author's mindset is not, therefore, a quest for his personal identity as "John," but recognition of his social role as a prophet. It is this public commission that shapes the structure and purpose of his book.

Like Christianity itself, Christian prophecy was then a relatively new phenomenon, lacking a fixed institutional form. Though recognized as a legitimate channel of divine revelation, the behavioral norms and ecclesiastical functions of prophets were still being defined, as we can see from extended discussions on this topic in Paul's letters (1 Cor 14) and the early Christian teachings collected in the *Didache* (11, 13). The primary role model was, of course, the prophets of the Hebrew Bible; however, a wide gulf of time and cultural context separated early Christians from the social structures that had defined and supported ancient Israelite prophecy. The office had to be recreated, drawing on more immediate examples to supplement prototypes inherited from the distant past.

As a general rule, Christian prophets fell within three broad categories. The first, prevalent in the early church, was more of a temporary charismatic function than a permanent office. Under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, ordinary Christians could momentarily assume the role of a prophet and transmit messages from God to the assembled congregation (1 Cor 14:1–5, 22- 33; Acts 19:5–6). This decentralized, spontaneous mode of divine communication was understood as the fulfillment of Joel's prediction: "I will pour out my spirit on all humankind and your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Acts 2:15–18; cf. 1 Thess 5:19–20). No special qualifications were required.

The second category comprised prophets with a recognized institutional role and an established, ongoing relationship with a Christian community

(Luke 2:36–38; Acts 13:1–2; Rev 2:20). Unlike the lay prophets of the early period, these were individuals with an acknowledged aptitude that specially qualified them to serve as divine spokespersons. Prophecy, for them, was not a temporary calling, but a profession with a defined place within the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Eph 4:11). According to the *Didache*, the congregation was obligated to support such prophets with regular offerings of food, money, and clothes (13:1–8).

Finally, there were the "free" or unaffiliated prophets. In contrast to the settled community prophets, these prophets were generally itinerant or dwelt in remote areas.[17] Typified by an ascetic and antisocial way of life, they often appeared alone or in small groups (Rev 11:3; Acts 11:27–28; 21:10–11). In some gospel sayings, Jesus is implicitly pictured as a prophet of this kind (e.g., Matt 8:20; 13:57–58). The basic pattern is already visible in John the Baptist (Matt 3:1–4), and undoubtedly draws on ancient archetypes such as the ninth century BCE Israelite prophet Elijah.

Distinctions between these prophetic types were not rigid, and wide variation from region to region can be assumed. John himself appears to have been a hybrid: an itinerant prophet with ties to several churches within a regional circuit.

Especially pertinent to our present discussion is the polarity between "true" prophets and "false." The critical importance of correctly discerning one from the other is stressed in a number of early Christian writings (e.g., 1 Thess 5:19–21; 1 John 4:1–3). This is a dichotomy to which John also refers many times, both as an immediate local issue and as a decisive eschatological divide separating the deluded many from the faithful few. In Thyatira and Pergamum, certain prophets—identified by the code names "Jezebel" and "Balaam"—have seduced members of the congregation with false teachings (2:14, 20; cf. 2 Pet 2:15–16). Jezebel, in particular, has spawned many "children"—meaning "disciples" (2:23)—whereas those who follow John are weak and wavering (3:1–4, 8, 15–16). The resulting feud prefigures the end time, when the battle between truth and falsity would be rejoined on a global scale. Humanity would spurn the words of two prophetic witnesses sent to warn them of approaching judgment (11:3–10), listening instead to the deceptive promises of a false prophet who would ultimately lead them to destruction (16:13–14; 13:13–14).

The need to discriminate between conflicting messages issued in the name of the same God was by no means unique to the early church. Confronted with a similar dilemma many centuries earlier, biblical traditionists proposed various criteria for evaluating prophetic claims. False prophets speak "the deceit of their own minds" (Jer 14:14; 29:8; Ezek 13:2), whereas true prophets

receive the divine word in their hearts and faithfully repeat it to the people (Ezek 2:8; 3:1–2, 10–11). False prophets were not sent by Yahweh (Jer 23:21–22; 28:15; Ezek 13:6), whereas true prophets were divinely commissioned for their task (Isa 6:8–12; Amos 7:15; Jer 23:18). False prophets serve Baal and other foreign gods (1 Kgs 18:25–29; Deut13:1–3); true prophets are loyal to the god of the ancestors (1 Kgs 18:30–39). False prophets mislead people with empty dreams (Jer 23:25–26), but the word of a true prophet is efficacious (Jer 23:28–29; Isa 55:10–11). False prophets promise "peace, peace," "all will be well with you" (Jer 6:14; 23:17; Ezek 13:10); true prophets proclaim "violence and destruction" (Jer 20:8; Amos 7:7–9).

From a modern perspective, the distinction is best characterized in sociological terms, as a conflict between central and peripheral prophets.[18] Central prophets are allied with the normative structures of state and cult. These institutions not only provide their livelihood, but also a defined social position and recognized status. It is no surprise, therefore, that these prophets generally speak in defense of the status quo. Peripheral prophets, in contrast, are aligned with a secondary cultural nexus that has been supplanted or submerged by the dominant social order. These spokespersons are the voice of a repressed minority, advocates for a way of life that has been suppressed or pushed aside. As such, they often predict the overthrow of the current regime.

Ancient Israel provides the textbook example of this dichotomy. In this instance, the central prophets were affiliated with the monarchy and urban elite, whereas the peripheral prophets championed the traditional values of the rural clans. In accordance with the usual pattern, the central prophets consistently issued messages of reassurance and continuity (e.g., Jer 14:13; 28:10–11), while the peripheral prophets relentlessly conveyed opposing messages of defeat and rejection (e.g., Jer 14:15–18; 28:12–16).

As might be expected, most Israelites preferred the benign pronouncements of the central prophets. When, however, the predictions of doom were largely vindicated by historical events, it was the peripheral prophets whom later generations recognized as the authentic spokespersons of the biblical God.

In that sense, John is very much a "true" prophet. Heir to a long tradition of dispute and denial, his message is not aligned with prevailing norms and expectations. Instead he speaks for an alternative world view, an opposing center of value and understanding that has been ruthlessly suppressed by the ecclesiastical authorities. Consequently, his mission is not to uphold the religious status quo, but to demolish it. Rather than support official church doctrine, his message challenges and controverts normative Christianity at every level of belief and praxis.

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND COMPOSITION

The book of Revelation manifests an explosion of fragmented imagery and jarring contrasts, a riot of color, sound, and movement. From start to finish, the book pummels the reader with a continuous barrage of sensations. In rapid succession, we hear the blare of trumpets, the roaring of a lion, booming thunderclaps, the rumble of earthquakes, the anguished wailing of the doomed, the raucous rejoicing of the elect. Vividly painted scenes sear the imagination: torrents of blood pouring from the "wine press of the wrath of God"; a brilliant rainbow encircling the divine throne; teeming throngs dressed in dazzling white; the sun turned "black as sackcloth"; the enraged thrashings of a "great red dragon"; clouds of fragrant incense billowing from the temple; Jerusalem descending from heaven radiant "as a rare jewel, like jasper clear as crystal."

The images burn deep into the mind, leaving an impressionistic pastiche of shifting scenes and vividly costumed actors brought together in a kaleidoscopic drama lacking a clearly defined plot. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume and intensity of sense impressions, many readers—both ancient and modern—have concluded that the book consists either of lunatic delusions or heavenly mysteries, which in either case are incomprehensible to the ordinary person.[19]

Nonetheless, confusion reigns in appearance only. Though superficially chaotic, the book does have a clear purpose and plan. To be sure, the narrative does not unfold in an orderly, linear sequence in the manner of classic Western literature. Instead Revelation is circuitous, repetitive, and digressive. The book is not, however, lacking method or direction.

John draws on a number of literary devices to create narrative structure, the most prevalent being the use of genre pieces. These are short formal units delineated by set introductory and concluding formulas. John employs many defined elements of this kind, including hymns, doxologies, dirges, epistles, messenger speeches, beatitudes, and proverbial sayings. Each module functions as a building block, which can be combined with others to create a larger pattern.

The collection of letters to the churches of Asia illustrates this format (2:1–3:22). Each epistle begins in exactly the same way, with a command to write to the guardian angel of a particular church. Next, the speaker identifies himself (e.g., "he who holds the seven stars in his right hand"), and introduces his message with the oracular formula "thus says . . ." The main body of the letter then commences with the phrase "I know . . ." followed by commendation or censure as appropriate to the situation and a call for repentance or vigilance. Each letter concludes with an exhortation to "hear what the

Spirit says" and a promise to bestow a gift upon "those who conquer."[20] The heavily stylized form of these messages, along with many connecting threads to subsequent visions, indicates that they never existed as independent letters, but were instead composed specifically for their present literary context.

A second compositional device characteristic of Revelation is the extensive use of thematic cues or cross-referencing. John repeats key motifs and phrases at widely spaced intervals in the book, thereby transcending the defined boundaries of the formal units and linking otherwise disparate episodes. Typically the details differ slightly with each repetition, but the resonance is sufficiently strong in each instance to establish a connection. The reuse and accumulation of images from scene to scene creates a complex network of cross-references that binds the text together despite the heterogeneous medley of hymns, visions, and sayings, thus providing mortar to the bricks of the fixed literary units.

The letters to the churches again provide noteworthy examples of this technique. Each threat or promise in the epistles is echoed elsewhere in a corresponding visionary element or eschatological event. The Ephesians, for instance, are told that they must repent lest "I remove your lampstand out of its place," a clear reference to the seven lampstands of the inaugural vision (2:5; cf. 1:12–13, 20) as well as to the similar fate of Babylon, where "the light of a lamp will not shine in you any longer" (18:23; cf. 22:5). In contrast, those Ephesians "who conquer" will be allowed to "to eat of the tree of life," as graphically illustrated in the concluding vision of paradise regained (2:7; cf. 22:2).

John also uses numerical sequences to establish overarching linkages between literary units. The prophet assembles large blocks of material by arranging serial instances of one genre in a numerically significant sequence of seven: the seven epistles (2:1–3:22), seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14), seven seals (6:1–8:5), seven trumpets (8:6–11:19), seven bowls (15:6–16:21). The number seven, corresponding to a calendar week, was an ancient symbol of completeness. Each set of seven thus takes a sequence of interlinked episodes full circle from beginning to close. The use of series provides, in addition, a dynamic impetus that propels the book forward, injecting a sense of movement that would otherwise be lacking in a static accumulation of isolated events and pronouncements.

A fourth compositional device—and for our purposes the most important—is scriptural allusion or intertextuality.[21] Throughout his book, John has incorporated a variety of biblical symbols, motifs, figures, and events in a pattern of almost continuous allusion. The number of these allusions is difficult to determine precisely, due to their obliqueness, but the total count is generally thought to be around four to five hundred, and in any case is certainly very large for a book of such slender proportions.[22] By far the greatest

number of allusions have been drawn from the major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—but many other books of the Hebrew Bible are also represented, as well as some extracanonical Jewish apocalypses, especially *1 Enoch*.[23]

Most allusions are subtle, amounting to nothing more than a short phrase or a few key words. In no case does John quote scripture directly; nonetheless, his dependence on biblical archetypes is evident from unmistakable parallels in wording, imagery, and narrative sequence. Though incessant, the allusions are never rigid or slavish. John deftly pulls together disparate strands of tradition and combines them in novel ways, weaving new cloth from borrowed thread.

Because of the considerable volume and density of allusions, Revelation cannot be read in isolation, as a self-sufficient work. Recognition of its scriptural background is prerequisite to a grounded understanding of the text. The book emerges from a sustained intertextual dialogue with a much larger body of tradition, which thereby becomes an integral part of the meaning.[24] Allusion situates John's words within a shared symbolic universe, amplifying the scope of his prophecy and extending its reach into the distant past as well as into the incipient future.

John does not, however, use his source materials uniformly, with the same level of intent throughout. Some allusions are casual, meant only to establish a connection between motifs or to evoke emotional coloring. Other references are broadly thematic, designed to illustrate a larger idea or establish continuity. A few are schematic, used to build a narrative structure and define hermeneutical context. The latter are of particular value in decoding John's meaning and purpose.

The following quotation from the book of Daniel is one such text. Consecutive verses from Daniel are in the left column; corresponding parallels from Revelation are in the right column.

Daniel 7:2–14	*Parallels from Revelation*
Daniel said, "In my vision by night, I looked and . . . four great *beasts came up out of the sea*, each different from one another. The first was like a *lion* and had the wings of an eagle . . . then another beast appeared, a second one, like a *bear* . . . I looked, and another appeared, like a *leopard.* . . . After that, I saw before me in my vision at night a fourth beast—terrifying and dreadful and very powerful . . . and it had *ten horns*.	I saw *a beast coming up out of the sea*, having *ten horns* and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names. And the beast which I saw was like a *leopard*, and his feet were like those of a *bear*, and his mouth like the mouth of a *lion*. (13:1–2)

Daniel 7:2–14	*Parallels from Revelation*
"While I was thinking about the horns, another *horn* appeared, a little one, coming up among them . . . this horn had *eyes* like the eyes of a *man* and a mouth *speaking great* boasts.	I heard behind me a loud [lit. *great*] *voice* like a *trumpet* . . . I turned to see the voice that was *speaking* to me and I saw . . . one like a son of *man* . . . his *eyes* were like a flame of fire. (1:10, 12, 14)
"As I looked *Thrones were set up,* And the Ancient of Days *took his seat*;	there before me was a *throne* in heaven, with *One sitting on the throne* . . . and *around the throne were twenty-four thrones* (4:2, 4)
His clothing was as *white as snow* And the *hair* of his *head* like pure *wool*.	The *hair on his head* was *white as wool*, like *snow* (1:14)
His *throne* was *ablaze* with *flames*, Its wheels *burned* with *fire*.	seven *blazing* lamps *burned* before the *throne* (4:5c)
"A *river of fire* was flowing, *coming out from before him.*	*from the throne* came *flashes of lightning* (4:5a)
Thousands upon thousands attended him, *myriads upon myriads* stood before him.	I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was *myriads of myriads*, and *thousands of thousands* (5:11)
The court was *seated*, And the *books were opened*.	Then I saw a great white throne and one *seated* upon it. . . . And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and *books were opened* (20:11–12)
I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words that the *horn* was *speaking*.	The first voice, which I had heard *speaking* to me like a *trumpet*, said "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." (4:1b)
As I watched, the *beast* was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the *burning fire*.	And the *beast* was captured and . . . thrown alive into the lake of *fire burning* with brimstone.(19:20)
As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for an *appointed period of time*.	He seized the dragon … and he threw him into the abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer, until the *thousand years* were ended. (20:2–3)
"As I *looked* in the night visions, there before me was *one like a son of man*, coming with the *clouds* of heaven.	I *looked*, and there before me was a white *cloud*, and seated on the cloud was *one like a son of man* (14:14; cf. 1:7)

Daniel 7:2–14	*Parallels from Revelation*
He *came* to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.	He *came* forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne (5:6–7)
To him was given dominion and glory and sovereignty, so that all *peoples, nations and languages* should serve him.	You were slain and with your blood you purchased for God *men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation*. You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth. (5:9–10; cf. Dan 7:18)
His dominion is an *everlasting dominion* that will not pass away; his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.	"To the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and *dominion forever and ever*." (5:13; cf. 11:15)

As shown in the preceding table, every verse in this pericope from Daniel has at least one corresponding allusion in Revelation. The relationship is not strictly one-to-one, as some verses are referenced several times. For the sake of conciseness, however, only the most salient parallels have been included in the comparison.

Allusions to Daniel's dream are not evenly distributed throughout Revelation; instead they occur in clusters at key transitions or pivots in the text, specifically in the inaugural vision in chapter 1, in the description of the heavenly court in chapters 4–5, and in the rise of Satan's evil empire in chapter 13. All three episodes depict commissioning scenes. In the first, John is commissioned as a prophet; in the second, the Lamb is granted a throne and declared "worthy" to open the scroll of judgment; in the third, two demonic beasts are commissioned to deceive and destroy humanity.

Clearly Daniel's dream has had a formative impact on John's vision. Though many different literary strands have been woven into the fabric of Revelation, this pericope from Daniel is more pervasive and consequential than any other single source. It is a precursor to John's own mission and self-understanding, a premonition of what he himself would see and hear centuries later, and as such, definitive for the central purpose and characteristic themes of his book. In many respects, John's whole opus is a sustained meditation on the meaning of this one short passage. Everything else is to some extent an embellishment.

Key to understanding the relationship between Daniel 7 and the book of Revelation are parallel allusions to the "words that the horn was speaking" as heard by Daniel and the "voice like a trumpet" who speaks to John. A play on words is evident, even in English translation, but where the association between a musical "horn" and an animal "horn" is vague and abstract to us,

the connection would have been definite and concrete to its original audience. In the ancient world, a trumpet was literally a "horn," typically that of a ram. The Israelites frequently used horns of this type for ceremonial and military purposes (e.g., Ps 98:6; Jos. 6:3–8), a practice still familiar to later Jews in a liturgical context. The semantic linkage is implicit in the text of Daniel, where the same Aramaic word [*qarnā*] is used to refer both to the little "horn" of the vision and to a type of trumpet played during religious ceremonies (Dan 7:11; cf. 3:5). John—who certainly knew Aramaic, probably as his native language—was unquestionably aware of the implied double-entendre in his literary source, and has drawn on those connotations to develop his own ironical play on words.

That the "trumpet" speaking in Revelation is directly based on the little "horn" referenced in Daniel is conclusively confirmed by a close reading of the text. First of all, John describes his encounter in an unusual way: "I turned to *see the voice* speaking to me" (1:12a). This odd turn of phrase is based on the Greek of Daniel 7:11 (LXX): "then I *beheld the voice*." The original meaning is clearer in the Aramaic text: "I kept *looking because of the sound* of the boastful words that the horn was speaking." Second, the correspondence extends beyond what John hears to include the appearance of the speaker. In a related episode, an angelic interpreter further describes the "horn" seen by Daniel as "a king of fierce countenance [lit. *strong face*]" (Dan 8:23). This would be an apt characterization of the heavenly being who speaks to John: "out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword and his *face* was like the sun shining in its *strength*" (Rev 1:16). Finally, the throne room scene in Revelation closely parallels Daniel's dream in language, sequence, and imagery.[25] In each vision, the deity sits in state, surrounded by the thrones of his counselors (Dan 7:9; Rev 4:3–4); "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" stand in attendance (Dan 7:10; Rev 5:11); a champion comes forward and is presented to the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:13; Rev 5:6–7); the chosen hero is granted "dominion, glory, and a kingdom" (Dan 7:14; Rev 5:12–13). Most importantly, in each narrative, the visionary sequence is initiated by a "horn" speaking (Dan 7:8; Rev 4:1).

Elsewhere in the book of Daniel, the nature and scope of the "boastful words" spoken by the little horn are developed more fully. We are told that the king symbolized by the horn will "wear down the saints" and "by smooth words turn to godlessness those who act wickedly" (Dan 7:25; 11:32; cf. Rev 13:7, 14). This king "will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods." (Dan 11:36; cf. Rev 13:5–6).

As originally conceived, these verses referred to a Hellenistic ruler, Antiochus IV, who governed the east Mediterranean empire of Seleucia during the mid-second century BCE. Antiochus appears to have been the first Seleucid king to adopt the public fiction of deity incarnate, as indicated

by divine epithets on coins as well as by his chosen title Epiphanes, meaning "God Manifest." In his self-appointed role as divine "Savior of Asia," Antiochus was zealous in shining the light of Hellenistic civilization upon the barbarian darkness. The king actively promoted Greek ideals and institutions, building theaters, marketplaces, gymnasiums, and temples in cities throughout his realm. Where enlightenment was not willingly accepted, however, Antiochus resorted to more forceful methods of instruction, including torture, imprisonment, and mass executions.

Among the ethnicities within his dominion, the Jews were particularly resistant to cultural re-education and therefore merited special disciplinary measures. Accustomed as they were to systematic abuse from a long succession of foreign overlords, the Jews patiently—if resentfully—endured Antiochus' dictates as long as these were confined to civil and military matters. But when the king had the temple in Jerusalem rededicated to Zeus, sacrificed a pig on the altar, and forbade circumcision on pain of death, traditionalist Jews rose up in ferocious and ultimately successful revolt. Having in this way acquired unique notoriety as the very embodiment of evil, Antiochus was thereafter referenced in rabbinical literature with the epithet, "the Wicked."[26]

Though memory of the king's infamy was kept vivid through other channels, such as the books of the Maccabees and annual Hanukkah ceremonies, the historical association between Antiochus Epiphanes and the book of Daniel was severed within a few decades. Thereby set adrift in the collective imagination, Daniel's visions became available for reinterpretation and reuse. In apocalyptic circles especially, the "little horn" was seen as an eschatological prototype, the harbinger of an evil ruler of cosmological proportions who would arise in the end time to afflict the people of God (e.g., 2 Thess 2:3–12).

That John was fully aware of the deeper connotations of the "trumpet" metaphor is clear both from his repetition of the simile and from the distinctive way that he uses it. Far from being obscure citations buried in the text, the two allusions are featured prominently, as portals to the two major sections of the book: the account of "things which are" (1:9–3:22) and the visions of "what must take place after these things" (4:1–22:9). The implications of this placement are unmistakable: the words spoken by the "voice like a trumpet" are equivalent to the "boastful words" uttered by the little horn in Daniel's vision. In short, the scope of the horn's deceptive words encompasses the book of Revelation in its entirety.

By equating the words of the little horn with the words spoken by the "voice like a trumpet," John is telling us, in effect, that his book is a false prophecy. Though paradoxical, this disclosure is central to his message and mission. Like his prophetic predecessors Isaiah and Ezekiel, John has not

been commissioned to proclaim salvation but to execute judgment; he speaks, therefore, not to enlighten but to delude (Isa 6:9–12; Ezek 20:49; cf. 1 Kgs 22:21–23).

We shall return to this topic later on, in the exposition. For the moment, the takeaway from the preceding discussion can be boiled down to three summary points.

First, symbolism and meaning in Revelation are largely derived from the Hebrew Bible and cannot be understood separately from John's Jewish heritage. Despite its apparent preoccupation with the future, Revelation is primarily engaged with the past and present. John is in constant dialogue with the received tradition, sometimes disputing, sometimes assenting, sometimes embellishing, sometimes subtracting, but always conversing. Scarcely a verse lacks a scriptural allusion of some kind.

Second, John interprets scripture from a contrarian and radically iconoclastic perspective that shatters normative assumptions, Jewish and Christian alike. For him, the Bible is not so much a bulwark as a battering ram. He invokes scripture not to support religious convention, but to smash it.

Finally, the overt meaning of John's pronouncements often runs counter to his hidden objective. An unexcelled master of misdirection and verbal sleight-of-hand, the prophet veils his intentions behind a shimmering cloak of heavenly delights. Beckoning us forward to gaze at the chimera, he draws us deeper and deeper into the enchantment, weaving a spell of such power and intricacy that few have managed to elude its grip.

The resulting bewitchment—now nearly two thousand years in duration— is ultimately less a consequence of John's rhetorical trickery than of our own misguided longing. Dazzled by visions of golden streets and bejeweled battlements, we have failed to discern the ugly, unadorned truth that looms directly in front of us. That encounter can no longer be avoided, however, for the moment of recognition is now upon us.

PLACE WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN CANON

From the early history of the church right up to the present, Revelation's authority and status has been a matter of persistent dispute. Though unwaveringly acknowledged as canonical by most Christians, its intrinsic value has been repeatedly questioned by a small but vocal minority.

Given its rapid spread from Asia Minor to other Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean, the book seems at first to have been tacitly accepted as authoritative. Several of the church fathers cited Revelation directly or indirectly. In these references, the validity and attribution of the book is taken for granted, as an assumption that requires no proof.

The first doubts emerged late in the second century CE, precipitated by a crisis instigated by the renegade Christian prophet, Montanus. Several decades after the book of Revelation appeared, Montanus took up John's mantle and gave his predecessor's vision literal and immediate relevance. Claiming to speak on behalf of the *paraklētos* (or "Advocate") promised in the Gospel of John, Montanus proclaimed the imminent end of the age. As foretold in Revelation, New Jerusalem would descend from the skies to land near the village of Pepuza in Phrygia, thereby inaugurating the millennial reign of Christ.[27] There Montanus gathered with his followers to await a consummation which, of course, never came. A pattern for the use of Revelation had nonetheless been established, destined to be periodically repeated right up to the present time.

In an attempt to quench the apocalyptic fervor inspired by Montanus, a coalition of Asian bishops sought to undermine their charismatic foe by discrediting his primary proof-texts. Labeled the "Alogi" by later church historians, these officials vehemently disputed the apostolic authority of both Revelation and the Gospel of John.[28] Not content merely to deny that these scriptures had been written by the apostle, the Alogi took the additional step of attributing them to the infamous heretic Cerinthus, thereby removing them entirely from consideration as authoritative texts. From this point on, Revelation had only a tenuous grip on the eastern churches.

When the Montanist contagion spread beyond Asia Minor, the Alogi's aspersions were taken up in Rome by the presbyter Gaius. Early in the third century CE, Gaius published a polemical tract rejecting Revelation, citing the book's many falsehoods and millennial teachings as reasons for the exclusion.[29] His arguments seem, however, to have had little effect. Revelation was already too entrenched in the devotional life of the western church for these objections to take hold.

Nonetheless, the matter was by no means settled. About 250 CE, the bishop of Alexandria, Dionysius, wrote an epistle pointing out marked differences in language, style, and theology between the Gospel of John on the one hand and the book of Revelation on the other.[30] Concluding that such dissimilar works could not have been composed by the same author, the bishop gave apostolic priority to the gospel. Revelation, he conjectured, was written by some unknown "John" or perhaps, as the Alogi had rumored, by the heretic Cerinthus, who "desiring reputable authority for his fiction, prefixed the name." Echoing the polemic of earlier opponents, the bishop suggested that the author of Revelation had projected his own licentiousness onto the new age, supposing that "the kingdom would consist of those things he desired, namely, the delights of the belly and sexual passion." Dionysius himself advocated an individualistic eschatology—then current among followers of Origen—in which the soul was judged and ascended directly to heaven.

The notion of an earthly reign of Christ, as pictured in Revelation, was in his eyes unspiritual, the product of carnal, worldly lusts. A vacillating and cautious thinker, Dionysius nevertheless could not quite bring himself to the point of open rejection. Noting that Revelation's mysteries are "beyond my comprehension," and that "many brethren hold it in high esteem," he contented himself with knocking away the supporting prop of apostolic authority.

Throughout the third and early fourth centuries, Revelation's status remained a point of controversy. Though some church officials, such as Methodius and Hippolytus, argued vigorously for its acceptance, others—especially theologians from the school of Lucian in Antioch and that of Origen in Alexandria—were firmly opposed. The Muratorian Canon—the earliest known list of authoritative Christian scriptures—included Revelation, as did the list later advocated by the influential church father Epiphanius of Constantia. Cyril of Jerusalem, on the other hand, left it out, as did Gregory of Nazianzius and Amphilochius of Iconium. The latter justified his exception with the comment, "some add to these the Revelation of John, but by far the majority says that it is spurious."[31] About 363 CE, the Council of Laodicea—meeting in one of the seven cities to which the book itself is addressed (3:14)—omitted Revelation from its fifty-ninth canon. Noting that "some reject it, while others include it," Eusebius categorized Revelation both as *homologoumena*, one of the "accepted" writings of the church, and as *antilegomena*, a "disputed" writing.[32]

In the latter half of the fourth century, several developments converged to prompt formal ecclesiastical acceptance of the book. To begin with, several new heresies—most notably Arianism and Manichaeism—had arisen, forcing the church to adopt a defensive posture. Many theologians now felt a pressing need to define the essential core of Christianity, to delineate once and for all the boundary separating true religion from false. Revelation was a valuable—if sometimes fickle—ally in this effort. Though the book had inspired schismatic movements such as the Montanist heresy, this was a sword that cut both ways. Revelation could also be invoked to illustrate, in horrifying detail, the gruesome fate of those who rebelled against ecclesiastical authority, thus providing a compelling argument for conformity.[33] A second reason for acceptance was the increasing power and prestige of the episcopate of Rome. As the Latin church became more centralized, the norms of the church in Rome took on added weight and influence. The book of Revelation, which had been accepted there early on, was among the beneficiaries of that trend.

In 393 CE, the council at Hippo recognized a canon of twenty-seven books, identical in scope and content to the present-day New Testament. Revelation was, of course, included. Four years later, the same canon was

accepted by the council at Carthage. These were regional gatherings with no binding authority over the church as a whole, but their decisions were, nonetheless, representative of prevailing usage among the western churches. Revelation's place among Latin-speaking Christians was now secure.

In the east, the status of the book remained equivocal. The Syriac-speaking churches did not admit Revelation to their canon until the sixth century, and a minority (the Nestorians) never accepted it at all. Though nominally included among the scriptures of some Greek-speaking churches, the book was omitted from the official lectionary and seldom quoted or referenced.

This setback was, however, temporary. Over the course of several centuries, Revelation gradually reasserted its hold on eastern Christianity. The tide began to turn in 367 CE, when Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote a pastoral letter listing those "books that are canonical and handed down to us and believed to be divine." Revelation was included in the list without comment or justification. Athanasius' decision was vigorously enforced and ultimately accepted by the Alexandrian school, thereby reversing a pattern of doubt and rejection reaching back to Dionysius. Further bolstered by the influential Greek commentaries of Oecumenius and Andreas in the sixth century, the book was given official canonical status at the council of Constantinople in 680. Revelation's place within Christian scripture was now secure, as evidenced by the stern visage of Christ *Pantokratōr* gazing down from the dome of many Byzantine churches.[34]

Here matters lay for nearly a thousand years. In some medieval churches, the Apocalypse was featured prominently; in others its presence was muted. But in either case, the question of canonical authority had been effectively resolved.

With the historical researches of Renaissance scholars such as Erasmus, the ecclesiastical consensus began to crack, soon bursting into open doubt and discord during the Reformation. Erasmus himself did not openly reject Revelation, but he did note that others had previously done so, and pointedly omitted it from his interpretive paraphrase of the New Testament. In a preface to Revelation, written in 1522, Luther complained, "My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book . . . Christ is neither taught nor known in it."[35] Noting that "many church fathers" had "also rejected this book a long time ago," Luther declared the Apocalypse "neither apostolic nor prophetic." Other Protestant leaders voiced similar opinions. Zwingli, for example, asserted "I do not accept the witness of Revelation because it is not a biblical book."[36] Calvin apparently concurred, for he wrote a commentary on every book of the New Testament excepting only the Apocalypse.

Modern biblical scholarship has been divided in its assessment. Following the precedent of the early church fathers, a majority of exegetes defend

Revelation, with mild reservations, as "a fitting close of the Holy Scriptures … the consummation toward which the whole Biblical message of redemption is focused."[37] Some prominent scholars have demurred, however, characterizing the book as "prophecy gone senile" or as a "weakly Christianized Judaism" that "cannot be placed on the same religious level as the other New Testament writings."[38]

Outside the seminary, opinions have been less nuanced. George Bernard Shaw dismissed Revelation as the "curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly allowed into the canon."[39] Harold Bloom characterized it as "a book without wisdom, goodness, kindness, or affection of any kind."[40] D.H. Lawrence went even further, denouncing Revelation as the "Judas of the New Testament."[41]

Nonetheless, the book has not lacked ardent defenders. In a widely read commentary, William Hendrickson described the Apocalypse as "beautiful beyond description . . . beautiful in form, in symbolism, in purpose, and in meaning."[42] The philosopher Johann Herder likened Revelation to "an eagle soaring to the sun . . . pre-eminent above" all other books of the Bible.[43]

Today most mainline churches view the Apocalypse much as one might regard a crazy aunt: a close relation who, though privately acknowledged, must nonetheless be kept in seclusion, away from public scrutiny. The book has about it a certain discomfiting impropriety—the occasional inappropriate leer, periodic lapses into unintelligible babbling—that rudely intrudes upon religious decorum. Though cherishing its rich legacy of hope, these established churches have implicitly concluded that a benefactor so bizarre and unpredictable cannot be left to wander unsupervised.

Among fundamentalist churches, on the other hand, Revelation is openly and enthusiastically embraced as the apex of scripture, the culminating disclosure of biblical prophecy, with direct relevance to the events of our own time. Within that perspective, the book is seen not just as an inspired text, but as a sort of prophetic cryptogram, which God has provided to inform the elect of his end time plan. Efforts to match the coded symbols to contemporary circumstances have spawned a vast popular literature that shows no sign of abating.[44]

The long-standing debate over Revelation's canonical authority is at bottom a proxy for larger ethical issues that are seldom directly addressed. Central to this subsurface controversy is the unspoken question: Does the promise of eternal joy excuse the indiscriminate slaughter that brings it to fruition? Or more succinctly: does the heavenly end justify the apocalyptic means? Is the book of Revelation compatible with the teachings of Jesus, or indeed, with even the minimum requirements of human decency?[45]

These questions may come into sharper focus if we step back for a moment and consider the dominant mythological paradigm underlying John's

vision. The struggle between God and Satan draws on a primordial episode that even then had been recounted for well over two thousand years, appearing, with superficial variations, in the religious literature of many Near Eastern peoples, including Sumeria, Canaan, Israel, Assyria, and Babylonia. The myth told of a primeval battle between a warrior god and the forces of chaos, typically pictured as a sea monster (cf. Ps 74:12–17; Isa 27:1; Rev 13:1).[46] In the prelude to combat, creation has unraveled, the world order has lapsed; humanity is assailed by drought, decay, war, and loss of fertility (cf. Rev 6:3–17). At this critical moment, a divine champion intervenes, slaying the chaos-monster (cf. Rev 19:19–21), thereby rejuvenating the earth and liberating humanity from the forces of death and decay (cf. Rev 22:1–5). With the creation re-established and the social order secured, the victorious god ascends his heavenly throne to the acclaim of his people (cf. Rev 5:11–14; 11:15–16; 22:3).

At its most fundamental level, then, Revelation asserts the principle of divine rule. A cosmological government has been established, founded on basic social values such as stability, prosperity, fertility, and peace. In accordance with ancient mythic archetypes, the resulting world order is to be understood as an expression of divine will, the visible manifestation of an invisible King. Given this paradigm, the key question is simply this: What kind of government is instituted in Revelation? What sort of world order emerges from the victory of God?

If we scrape away the patina of holiness that surrounds the eschatological kingdom, what we find is plainly a brutal and repressive police state. This is a dominion won by the sword and ruled "with a rod of iron" (19:15), a regime perpetuated through mass executions, terror, and public displays of cruelty (e.g., 14:18–20). Here only fawning sycophants are allowed to speak (4:8–11); those who fail to conform are exiled (21:27), tortured (16:8–11), imprisoned (20:2–3), or killed (2:23; 21:8).

In an attempt to soften the vivid bloodlust and harsh vengefulness of John's vision, many exegetes have drawn on the theme of cosmic regeneration as a filtering perspective. Seen through this lens, the events of the end time acquire a certain inevitability and moral distance. The world is destroyed not out of maliciousness, but because it has become corrupted, broken beyond any hope of repair, and therefore in need of dissolution and renewal. Likewise humanity must be purged before it can be redeemed and reconstituted as God's people. In the purified Jerusalem of the future, "the dogs—those who practice magic, and immoral persons, and murderers, and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" are to be excluded (22:15).

Allegations such as this are, however, a diversionary tactic commonly used to absolve tyranny of its own misdeeds. Roman officials, for example, justified the persecution of Christians by claiming that these were "atheists"

who participated in cannibalistic feasts, where they ate their own children.[47] Similarly, Nazi propaganda asserted that Jews were vermin belonging to an inferior race, and therefore deserving of mass extermination. These are just a few out of many instances, both ancient and modern, where a dominant elite has characterized a nonconforming subgroup as inherently "wicked," thereby justifying murder and theft.

Equally transparent are claims that the end time massacre is a manifestation of impartial divine justice or that God "permits" wholesale carnage as a means of refining and purifying the elect. Though well intended, apologetics of this kind are convincing only to the already convinced. Even a cursory reading makes it plain that heaven actively participates—indeed rejoices—in the torture and slaughter of earth's inhabitants (e.g., 16:1–21; 19:1–6, 11–21). The world is destroyed not as the inexorable, self-actuating consequence of breaking God's law, but through active, unrelenting malice.

Were the heavenly kingdom pictured in Revelation shorn of all religious pretensions and presented as an earthly government instead, few would have any difficulty in recognizing its true character, for history is littered with examples of cruel and rapacious empires such as this. By any acceptable standard—whether Christian or secular—the world order manifest in New Jerusalem is profoundly immoral. This is a regime that perverts basic social and religious values: here justice devolves into petty vindictiveness (16:5–6; 19:1–3), sadism is repackaged as righteousness (16:7–10; 14:10–11), murder becomes a moral crusade (2:23; 19:11–21). This is a world shrill with cries for vengeance but silent of compassion, a world ablaze with divine glory but dim in spiritual truth.

Of course this assessment reflects the values of an observer living within a modern democratic society and may not, for that reason, be relevant to the appraisal of an ideology developed in an ancient imperial context. From a historical perspective, this is certainly a valid concern; yet a negative verdict is by no means lacking precedent. As we shall see, one group of early Christians was specifically and vehemently opposed to this very picture of divine rule. The disjunction between ethical principle and heavenly imperative did not go unnoticed, even within Revelation's immediate religious milieu.

From a faith-based standpoint, what is at stake here is nothing less than the rationale and mission of the church. Does John's vision represent the consummation of the Christian hope, as many have claimed? Or is it rather a fundamental betrayal of the original impetus that created the church?

By dividing the world and its inhabitants into two mutually exclusive realms—the redeemed and the damned—Revelation builds walls instead of bridges. The result, predictably, has been fragmentation and entrenched divisiveness. In the words of a prominent New Testament scholar: "the dualist division of humanity in the Apocalypse is a failure of love, an oversimplification that eliminates not only the possibility of neutrality but also the complexities of life in which there are always shades of gray. But most important, this dualism is

destructive and dehumanizing. One's enemies, including large numbers of unknown people with whom one supposes oneself to be in disagreement, are given a simple label, associated with demonic beings, and thus denied their full humanity."[48]

It is instructive to contrast John's vision with Jesus' sayings, in which reconciliation and forgiveness are prominent themes (e.g., Luke 15:11–32; Matt 5:23–24; 18:21–22). Jesus did not, of course, invent these moral concepts. The idea of divine mercy has a long biblical pedigree (e.g., Pss 86:5; 145:8–9; Hos 11:8–9), as does also that of neighborly love (e.g., Lev 19:18; Zech 7:9–10). What is new in Jesus' teachings is their unconditional scope: here compassion is no longer confined to one's peer group, but is instead extended to include outcasts, foreigners, slaves, and sinners (e.g., Matt 9:10–13; 18:23–33; Luke 10:30–37). This radical insistence on empathetic inclusiveness remains one of the distinctive and more attractive aspects of Christianity.

The Apocalypse, in contrast, has repeatedly served as a weapon against real or imagined enemies, a channel for fantasies of revenge in which some opposing person or group is identified with the Antichrist and consigned to everlasting flames. In virtually every case, the polemical use of Revelation has been coupled with a morally suspect scheme of salvation in which a self-designated elect ascends to a position of heavenly glory, while their enemies roast in oblivion. The practical outcome is a divinely sanctioned pogrom, eliminating—if only wishfully—all who stand outside the small circle of the chosen.

One has to ask: if torture and slaughter are a necessary prerequisite to salvation, then who other than sadists and murderers will remain to be saved? Stated more broadly: does the annihilation of the wicked truly represent the victory of the good? Or is this instead the fundamental failure of the good—failure to empathize, failure to acknowledge other points of view, failure to transcend smug self-righteousness?

This ethical dilemma is by no means unique to Revelation; it applies, in varying degrees, to all apocalyptic writings. Throughout this body of literature—both the scriptural and the apocryphal—we find the same bold confidence in God's mercy toward the elect juxtaposed with an equally audacious presumption that everyone else will be annihilated. Revelation is singular only in that here that contradiction is directly confronted and fully resolved.

The moral question posed by Revelation is not a side issue, based solely on ethical sensitivities extrinsic to its original intent; rather this is the very crux of the book, its driving purpose and ultimate goal. Revelation is deliberately framed to force the reader to a moment of decision: does one accept this vision of heaven and join the glorious company of the elect? Or does one reject this all-powerful but morally bankrupt empire and face the consequences? The answer chosen is revelatory of character and destiny, cutting like a knife through all superficial allegiances to expose the beating heart within.

NOTES

1. For a detailed history of the book's influence and evolving interpretation, see C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 29–65.

2. See M. H. Abrams, "Apocalypse: Theme and Romantic Variations," in *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, H. Bloom, ed., pp. 15–17. Many of the ideas expounded in this chapter are derived from Abrams' insightful essay.

3. *Novum Organum* 4.69.

4. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.1.3–5.3.3.

5. See M. Riedl, "Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer's Sermon to the Princes," in *A Companion to the Pre-Modern Apocalypse*, M. Ryan, ed. (Brill, 2016), pp. 260–96; C. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 54.

6. For an in-depth discussion, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*.

7. M. H. Abrams, "Apocalypse: Theme and Romantic Variations," in *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, H. Bloom, ed., pp. 19–23.

8. Luke 17:21; cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 3.

9. Augustine, *City of God* 20.6–9.

10. *Dialogue with Trypho* 81.4.

11. *Against Heresies* 4.20.11.

12. *Paedagogus* 2.108*; Against Marcion* 3.14.3; 3.24.4.

13. For a cogent argument leading to this conclusion, see A.Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, pp. 25–50.

14. For a detailed discussion, see D. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, pp. 174–288.

15. Rev 1:9–19; 10:8–11; cf. Isa 6:1–11; Jer 1:4–10; Ezek 1:4–3:11.

16. Gen 20:7; Deut 18:15–19.

17. G. Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Fortress, 1978), pp. 8–15; D. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, pp. 214–15.

18. For definitions and an extended discussion of the social functions of prophets, see R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 69–88. For a similar discussion specifically related to John's social location, see L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 191–97.

19. So Dionysius, as quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.4–5.

20. For a detailed analysis of the sub-units and overall format of the seven epistles, see D. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, pp. 119–24.

21. For the concept of intertextuality and its relationship to the book of Revelation, see S. Moyise, *The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, pp. 108–38.

22. See the excursus in C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 123–25. For a list of allusions to the Hebrew Bible, see M. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 101–15; for a good overall survey, see S. Moyise *The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*; for allusions to the prophetic books, see J. Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation*.

23. For a detailed analysis of the connections between *1 Enoch* and the book of Revelation, see L. T. Stuckenbruck, *The Myth of Rebellious Angels*, pp. 281–323.

24. R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (T&T Clark, 1993), pp. x-xi.

25. For a detailed analysis and comparison, see G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel*, pp. 185–228. See also S. Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, pp. 45–63.

26. "Antiochus IV, Epiphanes" in *Jewish Encyclopedia* (Funk and Wagnalls, 1925), vol. 1, p. 634.

27. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 48.14.1; 49.1.2–3.

28. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.3.1–3; 51.32.2–33.3.

29. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28.1–2, quoting from Gaius' *Dialogue against Proclus*, also mentioned in 2.25.6, 3.31.4, 6.20.3.

30. Dionysius' epistle has not been preserved. Relevant sections are, however, quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25.

31. *Iambics for Seleucus*, a poem of uncertain origin but generally attributed to Amphilochius, a bishop in Asia Minor.

32. *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.1–4; 7.25.1–5.

33. See E. Pagels, *Revelations*, pp. 141–45, 165–67.

34. Within the New Testament, the distinctive divine title "*Pantokratōr*" appears almost exclusively in the book of Revelation.

35. Preface to the *Revelation of St. John* (1522); interestingly, this did not prevent Luther from identifying the Pope with the beast of Revelation 17.

36. Bern disputation (1528). See J. Roloff, *Revelation*, p. 2.

37. "The Revelation to John," in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 1493.

38. Adolf Julicher *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Smith & Elder, 1904); Rudolf Bultmann *Theology of the New Testament* (Scribners, 1955); E. F. Scott *The Book of Revelation* (Scribners 1940).

39. G. B. Shaw, preface to *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God.*

40. H. Bloom, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Chelsea House, 1988), p. 4.

41. D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (Penguin Books, 1931), pp. 14–15.

42. W. Hendrickson, *More than Conquerors* (Baker, 1962), p. 11.

43. J. Herder, *A Brief Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (1821), p. 276.

44. For a history of the use and abuse of Revelation, see G. Krodel, *Revelation* (Augsburg, 1989), pp. 13–32.

45. For a penetrating critique of apologetic efforts to skirt this moral question, see S. Moyise, "Does the Lion Lie Down with the Lamb?" in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 181–94.

46. For a detailed exploration of this theme, see A.Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*; also J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988).

47. S. Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity during the First Two Centuries," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.23.2 (1980), pp. 1055–1118.

48. A.Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 170.

Part I

ORIGINS

Christianity constitutes a symbolic world, a social construct built of beliefs, values, and hopes. Within the material realm, that world is manifest as cathedrals, Bibles, Sunday school teachers, crucifixes, and priests, but its true scope is a community founded on shared acceptance of an overarching paradigm within which human existence is encountered and interpreted.

At the core of that symbolic world is a narrative: the story of a man, his words, his deeds, his death and exaltation.[1] For those who stand within the agreed parameters of Christian ideology, the story evokes the human condition as realized in each individual through personal trials, suffering, perseverance, and triumph. By recalling and reliving the story, the community recognizes and celebrates the existential predicament of each person within its circle of light.

Though always a prominent feature of the tradition, the story's scope and perceived significance have varied according to time and place. Both those who told it and those who heard it have understood the story within a personal frame of reference that has differed widely, depending on individual circumstance, sociopolitical milieu, and historical context.

Initially, of course, the scope of interpretation was bounded by Jewish conventions. The protagonist of the story was seen as a messiah, a prophet, a rabbi, or a traitor in terms narrowly circumscribed by regional norms and expectations.

But once the story left its native territory and began travelling to other lands, it rapidly acquired new connotations. Within this larger context, the protagonist was no longer seen as a local Jewish figure, concerned solely with the current plight and future aspirations of his people; now he was perceived

as a risen god, the *Logos* incarnate, a divine man endowed with superhuman powers, a revealer of heavenly secrets, the King of kings, a sage imparting esoteric wisdom, a savior sent to redeem the elect—in short, as the historical realization of various social, political, and religious paradigms. In adopting the new faith, converts made the story their own by reinterpreting it in terms of their own cultural norms and spiritual traditions.

As these varied interpretations were incorporated into the story itself, the narrative progressively acquired new layers of meaning, providing a depth and richness that resonated with subsequent listeners. When they, in turn, retold the story to others, they emphasized or embellished those aspects of the story that had meaning for them, while omitting or downplaying those aspects that seemed obscure or problematic.

Even after it had attained a stable literary form, the story continued to evoke divergent responses. Some viewed the story as the common basis for moral instruction and spiritual edification; others saw it as codebook of secret teachings, accessible to a select few. For some, the story was the bedrock of dogmatic certainty; for others, it was a launching pad for other-worldly speculation.

As much or more than any other single factor, it is this multi-faceted appeal, the inner spaciousness and manifold outlooks of the story that has contributed to the global spread of Christianity. Because the story is itself the distillation of varied human experience, it is able to speak to a broad spectrum of personal circumstances.

At the same time, the presence of multiple perspectives has provoked repeated conflict and schism. Again and again, various subgroups within the church have drawn contrary meanings from the story; unable to reconcile the competing narratives, the community of believers has progressively dissolved into antagonistic factions.

Many have thought that if the husk of interpretation could be stripped away from the story, then the true kernel of Christianity would be revealed, unambiguous and unadorned. This conviction has fueled both dogmatic reductionism and scholarly quests for the historical Jesus, each initiated in the belief that once the "real" story was known, all doubts and uncertainties would be resolved.

But this notion mistakes the intrinsic nature of the tradition. The essence of the story is its multiplicity. It is inherently contradictory and ambiguous. It yields no hard truth, no definitive historical certitude, for the story is not just about a particular man, it is also about how people responded to what that man said and did. The man was the initiating event, but he is not the story itself. The story emerges out of a complex interplay between reality and imagination, where memory and metaphor intersect.

The important question here is not "what is the true story?" but "why did the story evoke truth for so many?" What was there about this narrative that appealed to such a broad assortment of personalities, places, and cultures?

NOTE

1. For an illuminating discussion of the role of myth and ritual in constructing and sustaining a symbolic world, see L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 11–14.

Chapter One

The Clash and Fusion of Empires

THE LARGE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Christian narrative did not spring full-formed from the biography of Jesus. To fully understand its genesis and significance, one must begin not with the man himself, but with his larger historical context. In order to understand that, we must go back more than three centuries before Jesus was born, to a key event that decisively shaped the social, political, and religious milieu from which Christianity emerged.

When Alexander of Macedonia conquered the Persian Empire, two worlds collided violently and fused, creating a new sphere of thought, action, and sensibility.[1] The resulting civilization was to endure in various forms for nearly a thousand years. At its zenith, it encompassed a huge swath of territory stretching from the Ionian Sea east to the Indus Valley, and from the river Danube south to the Nubian Desert. Included within its embrace were Anatolia, Bactria, Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, the Peloponnesus, and the Levant.

What made Alexander's conquest historically significant was not so much its sheer size as its unprecedented ambition, for this was the first large scale attempt to forge a comprehensive union of West and East. "West" in this instance refers to the Greek speaking peoples of the Balkan Peninsula and coastal Mediterranean; "East" refers to the areas dominated by the ancient civilizations of the Fertile Crescent. Though long familiar with each other through continuous trade and intermittent warfare, each culture had maintained a distinct identity, reinforced by mutual contempt of the other as foreign "barbarians." Now conjoined within the same boundaries and political regime, the Hellenic West and Asiatic East began a long process of assimilation, rejection, adjustment, and consolidation.

The results of that synthesis were not immediately evident. Several generations would pass before the normative patterns and characteristic forms

of the hybrid civilization emerged fully into view. Nonetheless, the goal of a grand union was explicit from the outset, actively promoted by Alexander himself. The most visible demonstration of that intent was the celebrated marriage ceremony at Susa, where ten thousand Macedonian soldiers took Persian wives at Alexander's behest. At the political and military level, Alexander promoted unification by including Asian soldiers in the Macedonian army and appointing Persian nobles to positions of lesser authority within the imperial government. Of far greater significance, however, was his policy of mass resettlement. Alexander established Greek cities at strategic points throughout the new territories, populated by an influx of Greek and Macedonian colonists. Completely surrounded by an indigenous populace with its own distinctive traditions, these urban centers inevitably became conduits of cultural exchange and diffusion.[2]

A comprehensive merger of disparate populations beneath the overarching structure of Hellenic civic institutions was thus a founding goal of the new empire. Though Alexander's successors largely abandoned his policy of racial integration in favor of more traditional imperial objectives such as economic exploitation, the historical trajectory of the Hellenistic kingdoms continued inexorably toward hybridization.

SYNTHESIS AND DISSOLUTION

Unification of the two civilizations would prove to be a challenging project. Each held a well-established world view, diametrically opposed to that of the other not only in outward manifestation but also in its underlying premises.

These differences were closely related to fundamental disparities in geography and economics. Agriculture, which was first developed in the Near East, had been a central focus of social existence in the region for many millennia. The mysteries of the fecund earth and sprouting seed dominated communal activity and determined the underlying pattern of daily life. This focus found expression in a graphic, emotionally charged zeitgeist, communicated through myths and ritual dramas. A primary function of these visualizations was to promote vicarious participation in the seasonal cycles of sowing, growth, harvest, and fallow. Stories about the gods vividly encoded the ancient way of life, guiding society and its citizens through the various phases of the agricultural year.

With the partial exception of Egypt, with its predictable floods and benign climate, collective experience had repeatedly shown that a stable food supply was not a given. War, drought, fire, or uncontrolled flooding could destroy the crop, leaving the survivors to starve. The structure of the world was therefore seen as fragile and temporary, constantly under threat of dissolution. The insecurity engendered by this perception was relieved through periodic ceremonial enactments that renewed and reaffirmed the world order.

The civilization of the East, which was far older than that of the Greeks, thus bore a proportionally heavier weight of tradition. This mass of custom and antique ideology served both to sustain and to paralyze. The time-worn ways provided a known path in a world otherwise perceived as opaque and capricious. Yet the resultant inertia also prevented an agile response in the face of the massive identity crisis that now engulfed the peoples of the East.

The Greeks—who inhabited a rugged peninsula broken up by multiple gulfs and a lengthy archipelago—were, in contrast, primarily a trading and seafaring people. Though by no means unfamiliar, the seasonal cycle of sowing and harvesting did not dominate community life to the same extent. Because of this attenuated connection to agricultural rhythms, Greek cosmological speculation was more abstract, more nimble, and more wide-ranging than that which predominated in the East.

Two key insights emerged from the resulting intellectual liberation.

The first of these was the idea conveyed by the Greek word *kosmos*. A cosmos is an ordered, coherent system, subject to the laws of cause and effect. Such a world is rationally intelligible, open to objective observation and analysis. It can be dissected, weighed, counted, and manipulated, its secrets extracted and categorized.

The second insight was the idea of humanity as a phenomenon in and of itself. The foundation of this idea is readily visible in Greek art, where the human form was celebrated as the epitome of beauty, as well as in Greek philosophy, where the individual was conceived as a self-directed rational being, capable of engaging and understanding the *kosmos*. Here humanity was seen as an entity apart, emergent from the unconscious flux of the material world, having become, in Protagoras' famous epigram, "the measure of all things."

These two notions, radically novel to ancient thought, would have a lasting impact on the development of science and the humanities. For the first time, the physical universe and human endeavor both acquired a basis and purpose entirely their own, distinct—though by no means wholly independent—from the drama being played out by the gods.

With Alexander's conquest, the contrasting perspectives of East and West were brought into immediate juxtaposition. The resulting conflict and fusion unfolded in several phases.

During the initial period of consolidation, Greek ideals predominated. As the victors, the Greeks were able to impose their world view upon the conquered populace. Acceptance of Hellenic norms became prerequisite for admission into the social elite. Unassimilated Asians were soon relegated to the periphery of political and economic life.

Though dominant, Greek culture was by no means unaffected by its new imperial context. In classical Greece, the customary sphere of social and

political activity had been the *polis*, a term which refers both to a physical locale and to the body of citizens dwelling there.[3] Key elements of that institution were carried over into the cities founded by Alexander and his successors. Just as in Athens or Corinth or Megara, the new settlements had characteristic Greek edifices such as gymnasia, theaters, temples, stadia, and an *agora* or central marketplace. But where the classical Greek *polis* had been compact and insular, the Hellenistic cities were administrative centers for large, ethnically diverse provinces.[4] Equally important, these cities were inhabited by Greeks from all over the eastern Mediterranean, with conflicting regional allegiances, now much attenuated.

As a result, it was no longer possible to base citizenship on the traditional commonalities of origin and local heritage. Civic identity was now associated primarily with broad cultural norms, which could be acquired even by foreigners through education. To accommodate this new sphere of belonging, the horizons of the *polis* expanded to fill the *oikoumenē*, the "inhabited world"—an inclusive concept from which the English adjective "ecumenical" is derived. Following the example of Diogenes, a few Greeks now began to think of themselves as *kosmopolitēs* "citizens of the world,"[5] free of all political allegiances.

Where successful, the marriage of Hellenic rationality and Asiatic empiricism produced a dynamic cosmopolitan culture, abounding with hybrid vigor. Stimulated by the fusion of Babylonian and Egyptian learning with the analytical facility of the Greeks, notable advances in astronomy, mathematics, physics, and medicine resulted, as well as remarkable feats of engineering.[7]

In many respects, this was an age of exceptional genius. A succession of Hellenistic thinkers took science from the theoretical realm of philosophy and transformed it into the empirical methodology familiar to us today. Eratosthenes, for example, founded the discipline of geography, calculated the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy, and devised the grid system of longitude and latitude still used to fix map location. Based on his observations of the heavens, Aristarchus of Samos deduced that the earth and other planets revolved around the sun and that the stars appeared "fixed" due to their vast distance, thereby becoming the first thinker to grasp the true scope and organization of the universe. Herophilus of Chalcedon introduced the experimental method to medicine by initiating the practice of dissecting corpses in order to understand the functions of the body. Euclid systematized the axioms of geometry in a comprehensive work, which became the foundation of mathematical instruction up to the modern era. Archimedes discovered the principle of hydrostatic displacement, calculated the value of *pi* to a high degree of precision, devised an early form of integral calculus, and formulated the principles of the lever, pulley, and screw.

The practical ingenuity manifest in these endeavors was apparent in architecture and engineering as well. The Colossus of Rhodes and the Pharos lighthouse—acclaimed as two of the seven wonders of the ancient world—were both built during this period. Each exemplified, in a slightly different way, the grandiose ambition and technical proficiency of Hellenistic monumental architecture. On a smaller scale, engineering marvels such as the astrolabe and the earliest known analog computer were also devised. The latter was a 37-gear mechanical device used to compute the relative motions of the sun and moon and thereby predict lunar eclipses, based on astronomical periods originally determined in Babylonia.[8] Other inventions attributable to Hellenistic engineers include the compound pulley, cogged gears, the piston-driven pump, the surveyor's wheel, the siphon, the augur, the mechanical water clock, the steam engine, and a host of ingenious—if terrifying—war machines such as the repeating bolt thrower and the torsion catapult.

The epitome of Hellenistic brilliance was the city of Alexandria.[9] Founded by Alexander himself, the city expanded rapidly, soon becoming one of the most populous metropolises in the ancient world. In addition to a teeming Egyptian quarter, the polyglot population included the largest urban Jewish community then existing, as well as a miscellaneous assortment of Greeks from throughout the Mediterranean. Here ideas converged from all directions, coalesced in intriguing and sometimes bizarre configurations, then went out again, to be disseminated widely.

At the center of this intellectual ferment was the *Musaeum* of Alexandria and its adjunct, the royal library. Dedicated to the divine Muses, the *Musaeum* comprised lecture halls, meeting rooms, gardens, and the most extensive book collection in antiquity. Variously estimated to encompass 400,000 to 1,000,000 volumes, the library included tomes from every area of ancient knowledge, systematically gathered from all parts of the known world.[10] Scholars and thinkers from all over the Mediterranean congregated there to conduct research and engage in philosophical disputations.

Yet for all its iridescence, this was also a period of general cultural decline. The reverse side of Hellenistic creativity was the erosion of traditional values. The same ferment that sparked new insights also corroded stabilizing institutions and unifying customs.

Forced to compete in the marketplace of ideas, established belief systems were unable to retain their monopolies as assumed cultural norms. Conventional standards of thought and behavior gradually lost their compelling moral force. Lacking the full assent of all citizens, ancient creeds decayed or

collapsed, to be replaced by the latest philosophical or religious fad. Ethics and religion—even nationality—increasingly became a matter of personal choice rather than a fixed heritage. In proportion as innovation and individualism waxed, continuity and coherence waned.

THE CRISIS

The resulting crisis of confidence surfaced first among the peoples of the East. As the disenfranchised citizens of a dismantled empire, these had confronted the bewildering effects of cultural disintegration from the moment of conquest. Abruptly thrust into an alien world order, Asians had struggled to regain their vitality and sense of purpose. The old ways were everywhere suppressed or declining, and the new ways remained offensive to traditional sensibilities.

The history of the Jews—which is better known than that of any other Near Eastern people of the time—is illustrative of the ways in which the conquered population responded to this existential cataclysm. We have already considered one such response: the Maccabean revolt, which led to an independent Jewish kingdom under the Hasmonean dynasty. This was, however, an exceptional event rather than a general trend. Among the indigenous peoples of the East, only the Jews and the Parthians were able to break free from Greek hegemony. Overt rebellion was uncommon among the subject populations, and full liberation a distinct anomaly.

Apart from the interlude of independence, the Jews responded to the intrusion of Hellenistic culture in three primary ways. The first, especially characteristic of the urban elite, was to actively adopt the trappings of the new rulers, including Greek language, dress, and education. By the beginning of the second century BCE, most cities in Syria-Palestine featured prominent Greek structures such as gymnasia, Olympian temples, and theaters. The Jewish aristocracy—which was closely allied with the imperial government—had established privileges and a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Outside Palestine, where the majority of Jews lived, accommodation to the dominant culture was even more pronounced. *Koinē* was now the native tongue of many Jews; indeed, so few read Hebrew that it became necessary to translate the scriptures into Greek. Nonetheless, even the most thoroughly Hellenized Jews seldom abandoned their native heritage altogether, instead combining elements of each tradition in an idiosyncratic mélange.

The culmination and prime exemplar of this ongoing cultural synthesis was Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher from Alexandria. The centerpiece of Philo's work was an attempt to harmonize Greek and Jewish thought by combining Plato and Moses in a comprehensive philosophical system.[11] Using allegorical methods then popular among Greek exegetes, Philo methodically reinterpreted the Hebrew Bible as a collection of universal truths, made comprehensible through the application of reason. Stripped of its historical roots and raw passion, scripture thereby became a benign parable of spiritual development, a muse for the sophisticated cosmopolitan thinker.

A second characteristic response was passive resistance. In the rural areas of Palestine, as throughout much of the pastoral Near East, the peasants continued plodding along the same well-trodden paths as their ancestors, disrupted only intermittently by the demands of the central government for taxes or manpower. Here the ancient way of life was still mostly intact, providing a vast reservoir of social conservatism. To the extent that tradition was impinged by the demands of distant urban overlords, the peasantry responded with outward compliance and concealed resentment. For the most part, however, theirs was a static world, largely unaffected by the innovation and ferment that shook the cities.

The third and most prolific type of response comprises the many renewal movements of the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. In large terms, these movements sought to recreate or revitalize indigenous culture. The impetus for this quest was the pervasive decay of traditional norms and customs. The resulting anomie was resolved by postulating an alternative community structure based on some real or imagined historical precedent.

Jewish renewal movements took a wide variety of forms ranging from mystical to apocalyptic and from radical to reactionary. In times of intense socio-political stress, these movements sometimes erupted into armed revolt, as manifested in the Maccabean war and much later, in the Zealot, Kitos, and Bar Kokhba insurrections. But this was by no means a necessary result. More typical was a prolonged process of internal realignment and adjustment, evident in the oral traditions underlying the *Mishnah* and the *Midrash*. Other possible responses included flight into an esoteric mysticism as exemplified by the early Merkabah literature, or passively awaiting a catastrophic judgment imposed from outside the realm of history, as envisioned in apocalyptic writings such as the books of Daniel, *1 Enoch*, and *Testament of Moses*.

Despite many outward differences, these renewal movements were all directed toward cultural revival, generally pictured either as an idealized future, purged of corruption and oppression, or as a restoration of the glories of the past, when Israel was faithful and God was benevolent. What these scenarios had in common was their remove from the present, which was

intolerable,and their linkage to historical archetypes such as the Davidic dynasty or the exodus event. In every case, the halcyon past to which the faithful were to return was rather different than anything that David or Moses would have known, but historical accuracy was never the point.

Renewal movements of this type continued to emerge well into the Roman period. Of particular interest to our discussion is, of course, the religious revival initiated by Jesus of Nazareth. To the extent that it can be reconstructed, this crusade conformed to the same general pattern as its predecessors. Though distinctive in scope and emphasis, the underlying premises and ultimate goals of the "Kingdom of God" were not unlike those of earlier renewal movements. What made this particular development noteworthy was not so much its uniqueness as its immense historical impact. It would not, however, be the culture of origin that was thereby revitalized and transformed, but that of the conquerors, who were now conquered in turn.

The prolonged crisis percolating through the Asian population took longer to develop among the Greeks. As masters of the eastern Mediterranean, the Hellenistic elite were able to boldly carry on, even as the new civilization they had built began to crack and crumble.

Politically, the decline began with Alexander's death. For the next half century, the history of the region was dominated by the near continuous brawls of his successors over territory, status, and resources.[12] As if caught in an infinitely repeating loop, victory alternated with defeat, borders expanded and collapsed, thrones were won and lost, and friend transformed into foe in a kaleidoscopic whirl of shifting allegiances. Amid these chaotic and unpredictable circumstances, only the opportunistic and the oblivious thrived. Many Greeks looked for an exit: some through emigration, some through philosophical detachment, and some through a quest for spiritual liberation.

A long process of internal erosion now began, resulting in a gradual hollowing out of social and political life, leaving the glittering shell intact, even as an echoing emptiness opened within. The moral and religious bonds that had sustained Greek civilization for the preceding 500 years progressively weakened. Traditional norms of civic duty and virtue were progressively abandoned, replaced by the opposing ideals of freedom of choice and personal happiness. Thwarted and constrained in the public domain, Greeks retreated to the smaller, more cohesive arenas of family, domesticity, business, and private contemplation, a trend that can be observed not only in politics, but also in art, drama, religion, and philosophy.

The malaise that now began to seep through the Hellenistic soul is attributable, in part, to the new scale of social existence. The classical Greek *polis* had been compact in scope, providing an intimate sphere of action in which personal accomplishment was acknowledged and celebrated. But after

the conquest of Persia, the Greeks suddenly found themselves within a vast territory subject to the arbitrary dictates of a distant potentate. Privileges and duties once belonging to citizens now became the prerogatives of imperial officials. In place of the face-to-face exchanges of the public assembly, citizens were confronted instead with the anonymity of a sprawling bureaucracy. The world had become larger and more varied, but also less personal, more complex, and far more uncertain.

Tychē (Chance)—previously a minor deity in classical Greece—now rose to a position of considerable prominence in public awareness.[13] Indeed, in some respects, she stood higher than Zeus himself, being, in the words of the tragedian Chaeremon, "a tyrant over all the gods."[14] Immune to flattery and indifferent to consequences, the goddess enforced the turn of events experienced by mortals as chance. From a cosmic perspective, however, those events proceeded not from divine whim but from inviolate universal principles. *Tychē* and her sisters, the *Moirai* or "Fates" did not determine outcomes; rather they collectively oversaw unfolding events in order to ensure that the destiny decreed for each being was carried out exactly as ordained. Even the gods were unable to alter the dictates of fate.

To be sure, one might soften the blow somewhat through foreknowledge gained by consulting the stars, or perhaps deflect it altogether through a powerful incantation. Astrology and magic—frequent companions to the idea of fate—flourished, as evidenced by the many curse tablets, horoscopes, and spell books that archeologists have recovered from Greco-Roman sites.[15] Yet the desperation implicit in such measures is at bottom an acknowledgment that most citizens did not perceive themselves to be in control. Human destiny was what happened to happen, not what was chosen and accomplished.

The widespread perception of powerlessness that found public expression in *Tychē* was vividly captured by the celebrated Athenian dramatist, Menander: "Human intelligence is that and nothing more. It is the intelligence of Chance that steers the world . . . human forethought is hot air, mere babble."[16] Reason, formerly exalted as the highest human faculty, was now widely viewed as an exercise in futility.

The rise of *Tychē* had been preceded by the slow obsolescence of the Olympian gods. Since the age of Homer, the shrines of patron deities such as Athena had provided both a focal point for social solidarity and a visible symbol of divine favor. This assurance had proved, however, to be a frail prop in the wake of the famines, plagues, and multiple defeats that began with the Peloponnesian wars and continued, with escalating severity, with the Macedonian conquest of the Greek mainland and ending in total subjugation by Rome. Even before Alexander crossed over the Hellespont into

Asia, traditional Greek religion had begun a decline from which it would never recover. Doubts that the pantheon was able to remedy the many ills afflicting the *polis* began to surface. Disillusionment set in, and though nominal adherence to traditional rites and customs persisted, their force was much diminished, creating an opening for an infusion of exotic cults and new religious ideologies.[17]

THE QUEST FOR PURPOSE

Shattered and set adrift by Alexander, the flotsam of the East now washed ashore upon the beaches of the West—there to be picked up as shiny baubles by the Greeks themselves. Culturally isolated within a sea of Asiatic tradition, Greek colonists and mercenaries often participated in the cults of indigenous deities, seen as local manifestations of Demeter or Zeus or some other god or goddess from the homeland. Thus began a recurring pattern of adoption and reformulation, in which Greeks encountered a native cult, co-opted its rites and mythologies, and recast these into what was essentially a new religion, whose participants were mostly Greek.[18] This process occurred independently at many widely spaced locations and times: in Syria with Atargatis, in Anatolia with Cybele, in Egypt with Sarapis and Isis, and again much later, with the Jesus movement in the eastern Mediterranean.

Parallel to this development was the expansion of the mystery religions. Though of widely varying origin, these were all typologically similar, due to the central role of secret rites in which the "initiates" [*mystai*] took part. Because disclosure to outsiders was forbidden, the specific content of these ceremonies is in many instances uncertain, but the basic outline can be inferred from various ancient sources. As a general rule, the "mystery" took the form of a ritual reenactment in which the initiates participated in the key events of the sacred drama and encountered the god, and were thereby granted a dispensation, which could range from material prosperity to personal safety to eternal life, depending on the deity's area of specialization.[19] Some variants, including the Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries, had been present in Greece from antiquity, but always as an adjunct to the central cults of the Olympian gods. As these peripheral religions emerged from the shadows to become a prominent feature of the Hellenistic spiritual landscape, the practice of initiation was transferred to a variety of Asiatic religions, which then also became mysteries following the Greek model. By the late Hellenistic period, the cults of Isis, Cybele, and Mithras had all undergone this transformation.

What made the mystery religions widely attractive was their emphasis on personal salvation, as opposed to divine guardianship of the state, nominally provided by the patron deity of the *polis*. Also important was the emotional

catharsis delivered through the initiatory rites. For many Greeks, the mystery cults provided a spiritually satisfying venue, a means of attaining inner release from the prevalent frustrations and hopelessness of the time. Within the cult drama, individuals were no longer bound by an inescapable fate, having been liberated by the god or goddess. The choices converts made affected the outcome of their lives, taking them toward salvation or damnation. Here, if nowhere else, personal decisions mattered.

Not everyone was able to find solace in religion, however. Greeks of a more sophisticated bent generally turned to philosophy instead. During the Hellenistic period, this largely comprised repeated attempts to answer the central question of the time: "How does one construct a meaningful life in a tumultuous and uncertain world?" Answers ranged from "seek your own truth" (Cynicism) to "control what you can; accept what you cannot" (Stoicism) to "cultivate a private garden of earthly satisfaction" (Epicureanism),[20] but the proposed solution was in each case fundamentally therapeutic in nature. The goal was to discover a remedy for cultural malaise. Texts from this period commonly invoke the metaphor of medicine to characterize philosophy, comparing its practitioners to physicians tasked with diagnosing spiritual disease and prescribing the appropriate cure.[21]

By dispensing advice on existential questions, Hellenistic philosophers continued the ancient tradition of the sage as a guide to the good life.[22] The explicit goal was *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) or *apatheia* (freedom from worry). As Xenocrates, head of the Academy (339–314 BCE), put it: "The reason for discovering philosophy is to allay that which causes disturbance in life." By removing all such distractions, the philosopher would find *galēnismos* "tranquility," leading to the attainment of *eudaimonia* "contentment."[23] The specific means of achieving this state varied, but the result, with the exception of the Stoics, was self-absorption coupled with public disengagement. From the wide ranging interests and quest for universal truth characteristic of the classical philosophers, the scope of inquiry now narrowed to self-preservation. To the intelligent observer, non-involvement seemed the only tenable option.

With the Roman conquest of the Hellenistic kingdoms, the chaos and uncertainty of the preceding two and a half centuries gave way to the administrative tidiness of the *pax romana*.[24] With brisk efficiency, the new conquerors established public order, rooted out piracy, dethroned petty despots, and opened up international trade. An extensive system of paved roads was built to connect major cities, allowing quick transport and further facilitating the interchange of ideas, goods, and peoples.

While these measures did provide political stability, they did not remedy the longstanding spiritual crisis afflicting the eastern Mediterranean. On the contrary, the marginality previously experienced by the Asian population now came home to the former overlords. Although Rome adopted the trappings of Hellenistic civilization, these were not acquired through passive admiration from afar; instead the wealth and art treasures of the Greek kingdoms were systematically looted and hauled away to adorn the villas of the new ruling elite. The Greeks themselves were treated with thinly disguised contempt, like petulant children in need of paternal discipline. Any doubts about relative status and priority were dispelled with emphatic brutality. The rampant economic exploitation and casual disregard for indigenous sensitivities which had characterized the Hellenistic period thus remained in place, as did also the reasons for seeking spiritual alternatives to the grim realities of everyday life.

A PLETHORA OF GODS

Religiously, the Roman period was a time of extraordinary diversity. To the mix of Greek, Anatolian, Persian, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian deities already circulating through the urban environment, the prolific pantheons of the Romans and the Sabines were now added. Alongside these gods, and to some extent competing with them, were state cults featuring deified rulers, hero cults invoking the latent powers of some extraordinary figure from the distant past, and cults dedicated to various personified attributes, such as Harmony, Peace, or Victory. By the end of the first century CE, the range of religious options available to urban worshippers was enormous—many dozens in any large city, and many hundreds within the Roman Empire as a whole.

A particularly illuminating example of religious proliferation is provided by the Ionian city of Erythrae in Asia Minor.[25] A tax record found there, dated to the early Hellenistic period (ca. 300–260 BCE), lists no less than fifty-four different priesthoods active in the city at that time. In addition to cults dedicated to familiar Greek deities such as Athena, Artemis, Demeter, Aphrodite, Dionysus, Apollo, and Zeus, the inscription refers to various Asiatic deities including “Earth” and the “Great Mother,” plus a smattering of more exotic entries such as Ablabiai, Hestia Temenia, and Enyo. Though large, this catalogue is known to be incomplete, for part of the inscription is illegible, and archeologists have also unearthed a religious calendar from the late Hellenistic period listing many more. New cults continued to appear well into the Roman era. In 188 CE, the inhabitants of the city gratefully responded to a Roman proclamation of freedom by establishing a cult and festival dedicated to the goddess Roma herself.

If a heterogeneous era such as this can be said to have had a dominant religion, that would be syncretism or hybridity—the mixture and fusion of

different traditions.[26] This was, of course, more of a practical response to diversity than a formal ideological system or organized religion; nonetheless, it can be accurately described as the defining outlook of the time.

As a religious perspective, hybridity was based on several tacit assumptions. The first of these was theological equivalence—namely, that the gods and goddesses of foreign peoples were local manifestations of similar deities worshipped within one's own culture. This perception is attested in Greek thought as early as Herodotus, who noted correspondences between Zeus, Dionysus, and Hephaestus on the one hand, and the Egyptian gods Amon, Osiris, and Ptah on the other.[27] Similar connections between Greek and Roman deities were later made by Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Plutarch. Pliny the Elder generalized this observation by suggesting that the same deities are known by "different names to different peoples."[28] Within the cult, the idea of equivalence was conveyed by the common practice of using compound names—such as "Zeus-Ammon-Re"—to comprehensively invoke the fullness of divinity.

A second, related assumption was doctrinal inclusivity. Religious traditions were not seen as distinct compartments, but as overlapping domains with flexible boundaries. The rites, myths, and icons of one religion were not a unique possession or exclusive revelation, which must be preserved inviolate and protected from outside contamination; rather these were allegorical truths, which could be lifted from their original context and inserted into another, where they would retain their old form while acquiring a new, enhanced meaning.

The religious environment in which Christianity emerged was thus rich in symbol and heterogeneous in origin, with many lines of divergence and confluence. This was an era of blended traditions and cultural experimentation, a time of decay and metamorphosis, of simultaneous hope and despair, when the old gods withered and new gods were born, when all seemed lost and everything became possible.

Given this context, it could hardly be expected—and certainly was not the case—that the new religion emerged in isolation, free of external influences. Like virtually all religious institutions of that time and place, early Christianity was a thoroughly hybrid mixture. As it swelled into an international movement, the church drank deep from its cultural milieu, absorbing a vast array of myths, rituals, and theologies.

THE RISE OF THE HERO

One facet of the pervasive cultural syntheses of late antiquity is particularly noteworthy, because it directly bears on the origin and development of the Christian narrative. This is the ideal of the hero, found in many cultures globally, but especially characteristic of the ancient Mediterranean world.[29]

In its simplest and most prevalent form, the story of the hero tells of a young man—sometimes human, sometimes divine—who comes forward in a moment of crisis to act on behalf of the community. The hero then faces a series of challenges and setbacks, finally emerging victorious to public acclaim and everlasting glory.

Among Mediterranean cultures, this motif assumed a wide variety of forms. The most widely known is the epic tradition of the Greeks, which told of the wondrous exploits of a bygone age, populated by noble if tragic men such as Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector, and Odysseus. Alongside the epics, with their quasi-historical heroes, the Greeks also told stories about purely mythical figures, often half god and half human, like Herakles, Asclepius, and Perseus. The point of these narratives was not to provide a moral role model—a hero could be greedy, irrational, or murderous—but to exemplify the enduring power of personal initiative. Though still recognizably human in their motives and foibles, the heroes were god-like in their ability to accomplish remarkable things.

While epic figures such as Gilgamesh were not unknown to Near Eastern societies, here the exploits of the hero generally took place within the realm of the gods rather than in mundane history. The Babylonians, for example, told of a time before time began, when the world order was threatened by Tiamat, the goddess of the sea. Fearing for their lives, the divine assembly chose Marduk, a young and vigorous warrior god, to act as their champion. Mounting his sky chariot, Marduk found Tiamat, shot an arrow down her gaping maw, and pierced her heart. After splitting the monster's carcass into two pieces, Marduk set one piece in the sky to create the heavens and the other at his feet to form the earth.

Similar stories about the exploits of the gods were told throughout the Near East, with the partial exception of the Jews. Here centuries of rigorous monotheism had largely erased the distinctive contours of the divine hero. Already omniscient and all-powerful, the Jewish God did not need to prove his mettle. Instead the heroic ideal took the form of a Messiah, who would appear at "the end of days" to destroy the wicked and restore the fortunes of the holy people.

Intermediate between the earth-bound heroes of the Greeks and the victorious sky gods of the Near East were the divinized rulers of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. In this case, the idea of the hero was primarily conveyed through icons and inscriptions rather than through myth and legend. The enshrined statue of the deified king was the visible emblem of the state, a tangible symbol of legitimacy and authority, ultimately underwritten by heaven itself. While the main motivation behind these state-sponsored cults was political stability, the role of the monarch was by no means lacking the redemptive traits of the hero. Greco-Roman kings and emperors commonly bore titles such as "Savior" or "Liberator" to commemorate personal valor in

crushing foreign enemies and securing internal peace and prosperity. For example, in an inscription dated 196 BCE, the Hellenistic king Ptolemy V is extolled as "the living image of Zeus, son of Helios, the eternally living Ptolemy, Beloved of Ptah, god on earth . . . who has brought prosperity to Egypt, who gave her all her laws, founded temples and altars, and set upright those who needed help."[30]

Though the details varied widely from region to region, the heroic narrative cycle—consisting of crisis, nomination, trial, victory, and celebration—appears again and again in the myths, legends, political propaganda, and religious iconography of the ancient Mediterranean world. To the peoples of that time and place, the idea of the hero was not a remote fantasy, but an ever-present hope in the face of recurring disaster, deeply imbued in awareness through constant repetition.

The presence of a similar concept at the heart of the Christian narrative provided a ready point of entry for the message of the evangelists. When listeners heard about the miraculous birth and glorious ascent of a divine Savior, this notion did not seem strange or exotic, for they had heard something like this before, though not perhaps in such a compelling form. To them, the gospel was not "news" at all but a familiar story, already well-known and, for that reason, relatively easy to accept. Here, surely, was the Chosen One, foreshadowed in many traditions, who would lead the faithful from present darkness to everlasting light.

NOTES

1. The following historical summary is largely based on Peter Green's monumental work on Hellenistic civilization, *Alexander to Actium*. For a wise and well-informed overview of the period, see L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 24–39. For a synopsis of key social, religious, and cultural developments, see H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (3rd ed.), pp. 3–27.

2. H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 44.

3. For a detailed discussion of the structure and traditions undergirding the polis, see M. H. Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State* (Oxford UP, 2006), p. 56ff.

4. D. G. Shipley and M. H. Hansen, "The Polis and Federalism" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 52–54.

5. Diogenes Laertius 6.63.

6. N. Krevans and A. Sens, "Language and Literature" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 186–87.

7. For a survey of scientific achievements in the Hellenistic period, see P. T. Keyser and G. Irby-Massie, "Science, Medicine, and Technology" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 243–63.

8. T. Freeth et al. "Decoding the Antikythera Mechanism: Investigation of an Ancient Astronomical Calculator," *Nature*, Volume 444 (2006), pp. 587–91.

9. For details, see P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 80–91; also W. Adams "Hellenistic Kingdoms" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., p. 41.

10. R. MacLeod, *The Library of Alexandria* (I.B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 64–73.

11. For a synopsis of Philo's life and thought, see H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 139–40, 265–71.

12. See W. Adams, "Hellenistic Kingdoms" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 28–49; P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 119–34.

13. F. Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament* (Scribners, 1962), pp. 41–45.

14. Stobaeus, *Anthology* 1.6.16.

15. P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 595–601; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 360–64.

16. Menander, *Hypobolimaios* (F. H. Sandbach, Oxford, 1990), fragment 417.

17. For an extended discussion of this topic, see P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 586–95; J. Mikalson, "Greek Religion" in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 208–21.

18. H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 43; P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 589–90.

19. For a useful survey of the mystery religions, see H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 168–96.

20. The epigrams quoted here are the author's attempt to encapsulate each philosophy in a memorable phrase. To do so is, of course, to caricaturize complex systems of thought. The interested reader is directed to the more adequate treatments available elsewhere (e.g., H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 135–49; P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 602–46).

21. Dio Chrysotom, *Orations* 32.14–30; Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.23.30.

22. See R. W. Sharples, "Philosophy for Life," in *Hellenistic World*, G. Bugh, ed., pp. 223–38.

23. P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 52–64, 603–5.

24. P. Green, *Alexander to Actium*, pp. 647–49.

25. See J. Mikalson, *Ancient* Greek *Religion*, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 193–95; R. Parker, *On Greek Religion* (Cornell UP, 2011), pp. 98–102.

26. See H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 156–59.

27. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.42; 2.3.1.

28. Pliny, *Natural History* 2.5.15. For an extended discussion regarding the "translatability" of deities during the Greco-Roman period, see M. Smith, *God in Translation* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 243–73.

29. For a comprehensive survey of this theme, see J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton UP, 1968).

30. Rosetta Stone 3–4, 11–12, from E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Abingdon, 1976), p. 217.

Chapter Two

Diversity and Conflict in the Early Church

A DESULTORY MOB

Early Christianity was neither monolithic in organization nor uniform in creed. During the first three centuries of its existence, the church comprised a multiform and ideologically diverse assortment of communities scattered over a vast and continuously expanding geographical area. Since an overarching ecclesiastical structure did not then exist, each group developed its own belief system, which drew not only on Jewish scripture and various oral traditions conveyed by apostles, preachers, and prophets, but also on the religious paradigms and rich mythology of the immediate cultural environment. Differences from region to region were often pronounced.

A key factor driving this diversity was the extraordinary rapidity with which the movement spread. At the time of Jesus' death, the number of committed followers was relatively small, perhaps as few as twenty or thirty. Soon, however, rumors of a miraculous resurrection began to circulate, bringing a wave of new disciples into the community. According to the book of Acts, two months after Jesus' death the number of believers stood at about one hundred and twenty (1:15). On the day of Pentecost, this modest congregation was augmented by a surge of three thousand converts (2:41), followed by another two thousand over the next several weeks (4:4), with "multitudes of men and women . . . continually added to their number" from that time onwards (5:14). While this claim is almost certainly exaggerated, there can be little doubt that the new religion propagated rapidly to cities throughout the Mediterranean region. Less than ten years after Jesus' death, Christian communities had been established in numerous locations in Samaria and Judea, with outposts as far afield as Damascus and Antioch.[1] Within twenty years, we hear of churches in Cyprus and Asia Minor.[2] Within twenty-five years, the circle of evangelization had widened to include Macedonia, Greece, Dalmatia, and possibly Spain.[3] Within thirty

years, a sizeable Christian community was located in Rome itself.[4] By the end of the first century CE, an estimated one hundred Christian communities were sprinkled throughout the Roman Empire.[5]

This rapid territorial expansion thrust the young movement into a wide variety of social and religious contexts. The newly formed churches were dispersed over several provinces, encompassing numerous languages and divergent cultural traditions. Some of the converts were Roman, some were Jews, some were Egyptian, some were Greek, some were slaves, some were wealthy, some were educated, some were illiterate. Needless to say, these believers did not come to their new faith sharing a common set of values, needs, and assumptions.

Different groups, each with differing premises and agendas, understood the message of hope in different and often conflicting ways.[6] These viewpoints were conditioned by factors such as social status, political affiliation, educational background, and cultural heritage. As more and more converts from more and more places became Christian, more and more perspectives were progressively added to what was already a miscellaneous and disharmonious mix.

The gospel, which was still an oral and therefore fluid tradition, assumed the contours of the new cultural landscapes into which it flowed. Though the basic thrust of the message generally remained intact, the supporting details were often modified to better conform to the dominant paradigms of the immediate sociopolitical context. This is, of course, exactly what we would expect. To be viable, the gospel had to address the needs and situations of the various ethnic groups and social classes from which the new converts came. As the resulting traditions solidified in a fixed written form, these perspectives were permanently embedded in texts.

Because of their isolation within the vast reach of the Roman Empire, early Christian communities typically functioned as islands, each with its own meeting place, leaders, liturgy, and collection of sacred books. At this stage, "Christianity" as such did not exist. Churches had no formal affiliation and only a weak sense of greater union. The boundaries delimiting what was "Christian" were established not by a central ecclesiastical authority but by a local council of elders or a charismatic leader, such as a prophet or apostle. Lacking a universal creed or institutional structure, each church interpreted the significance of Jesus' life through the lens of local convention.

Given the random and incomplete information available to historians, a comprehensive survey of early Christian teachings is not feasible. Nonetheless, such bits and pieces as we do possess reveal an astonishing spectrum of belief. Two important groups, which are relatively well documented in ancient sources, may serve to illustrate the ideological extremes that existed within the scope of Christian tradition in the second century CE.[7]

The first of these—the Ebionites—was located primarily, though not exclusively, in the Transjordan region of Palestine. The group name is derived from the Hebrew *ebyônîm* ("the poor"), a label perhaps based on self-identification with "the poor" whom Jesus had proclaimed heirs to the kingdom of God (Luke 6:20; Matt 11:5). A group in Jerusalem bearing that name was known to the apostle Paul (Gal 2:10). The Ebionites may, therefore, have been a remnant of the original Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem, which relocated east of the Jordan to Pella during the uprising against Rome.[8]

The Ebionites were staunchly traditionalist Jews who did not think of the Jesus movement as a distinct religion, separate from Judaism. On the contrary, they claimed—not unreasonably—that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent by the Jewish God for the redemption of the Jewish nation. Gentiles were welcome to participate in that salvation, but only by accepting the norms and customs of God's people—in short, by becoming Jews themselves, with everything that entailed, including circumcision. After all, as bearers of the promises made to Abraham and possessors of an ancient scripture, it was not for them to change their ways to accommodate newcomers; rather it was the converts who must leave behind their pagan past and adopt the ways of their new religion.

The Ebionites thought of Jesus as the biological son of Joseph and Mary, conceived in the usual manner. Claims to a virgin birth or preexistent divinity were explicitly rejected. Jesus' unique stature as "the prophet of truth" was due not to an inherent divine nature, but to exemplary righteousness, having "attained through a virtuous life the right to be called son of God."[9] Like king David—the historical prototype of the Messiah—Jesus had been "adopted" by God in order to fulfill a specific commission (cf. Ps 2:7). He was to become a willing sacrifice, offered in atonement for the sins of God's people.

For the Ebionites, following Jesus meant imitating his zeal for God's commandments. The Sabbath was to be kept holy, ritual purity maintained, and traditional Jewish holidays celebrated, just as Moses had ordained. The only part of the Law that was no longer in effect was animal sacrifice. By providing himself as the ultimate, perfect sacrifice, Jesus had permanently fulfilled that requirement. Burnt offerings were no longer necessary. Taking that exemption to apply to the dietary realm as well, many Ebionites were strict vegetarians.

The second illustrative Christian group was founded by Marcion, a forceful though unimaginative thinker who took up the basic premises of the gospel and uncompromisingly pushed them to their logical extreme. Unlike later Christian theologians such as Origen or Augustine, Marcion was a dogmatic literalist and therefore unable to reconcile the many contradictions

of scripture or to explain them away as allegories of the spiritual life. According to his reading, the deity presented in the Hebrew Bible is a God of strict justice without mercy or goodness. Jesus, in contrast, spoke of a God of grace, redemption, and forgiveness. Obviously these are not the same God. The former is the lowly God of the material world; the latter is a "strange God" previously unknown to humanity. Following the God of the Law leads to guilt, punishment, and death, whereas serving the God of Love brings mercy, reconciliation, and life. These are antithetical divinities, distinct and opposed in every way.[10]

As the son of the God of mercy, Jesus came to liberate humanity from subjection to the God of wrath. He did not, however, assume a physical form because to do so would compromise his own freedom. Flesh and blood belonged to the material world created by the Jewish God and was therefore subject to his rule. Jesus accordingly appeared as a "phantasm," visible but immaterial.

To support his theology, Marcion established the first known canon in the history of Christianity. His scriptures comprised ten of Paul's letters and an abbreviated version of Luke. As a collection of writings by and about the Jewish God, the Hebrew Bible was excluded altogether. Nonetheless, even this restriction did not satisfy Marcion. Having noted that the writings of Paul contained various references to Jewish scripture, Marcion determined that these were falsifications inserted into the text by later scribes. In order to restore the original intent of Paul's letters, the offending passages had to be excised, a task which he took upon himself, painstakingly whittling down the corpus to satisfy his ideological specifications. The gospel of Luke received similar treatment before it too was deemed acceptable.

Marcion was hugely successful as an evangelist, perhaps even more so than his hero and role model, the apostle Paul. Far from being an obscure Christian sect of minor historical interest, the churches that he founded flourished, in some regions soon becoming the dominant form of Christianity, prompting the apologist Justin Martyr to complain that the contagion had spread to "many peoples of every nation."[11] As late as the fifth century, orthodox bishops felt it necessary to warn their congregations to be wary when attending churches outside their area, lest they find themselves unwittingly worshipping alongside Marcionite heretics.[12]

The Ebionites and the Marcionites thus promoted two starkly contrasting visions of what it meant to be a Christian. The former understood Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah predicted in the Hebrew scriptures; the latter denied that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah or that his appearance was foretold in the Bible. The Ebionites considered Jesus to be completely human and not divine; the Marcionites thought of Jesus as completely divine and not human. The Ebionites claimed that the traditional God of Israel was

the one true God of all creation; the Marcionites regarded that same God as secondary and inferior to the true God, who was completely unknown to the Jews. The Ebionites advocated strict adherence to the Law as a means to salvation; the Marcionites viewed the Law as an impediment, which must therefore be rejected to attain salvation. Where the Marcionites revered Paul as the greatest of the apostles, the Ebionites scorned him as a despicable apostate. The Marcionites based their scriptures almost entirely on Paul's letters and excluded the Hebrew Bible; the Ebionites retained the Hebrew Bible as their primary scripture and excluded the letters of Paul. Yet both groups claimed to be Christian.

A MULTIPLICITY OF GOSPELS

Even if we did not already know, based on a number of historical sources, that the early church was internally diverse, this could be inferred from the simple observation that the canon contains multiple gospels, each with a distinctive perspective and regional bias. These include not only the four named gospels familiar to readers of the New Testament, but also several unnamed gospels, which are explicitly acknowledged, but were never given formal recognition as individual testimonies.

Because these divergent trajectories are important to later discussion, a short detour is in order. Let's deviate here briefly for a quick survey of New Testament gospels. We begin with the four recognized versions: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.[13]

Mark, the earliest of these, was evidently composed for a gentile audience, as indicated by periodic asides explaining what to outsiders might appear to be puzzling Jewish customs (e.g., 7:3–4). That the intended target was specifically Roman is suggested by the inclusion of several Latin expressions, as well as by the ultimate recipient of the unfolding disclosure. The first person to fully grasp Jesus' identity as the suffering Son of God is not one of his Jewish disciples, but the Roman centurion in charge of his execution![14] The primary theme of this gospel is Jesus' role as the obedient servant who came not to glorify himself but to "give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). As the Messiah, Jesus must suffer and die to make salvation possible for others. For this reason, the climax of the story is not the triumph of resurrection but the tragedy of undeserved ridicule, flogging, and death. Unlike other New Testament gospels, Mark did not originally include a post-resurrection appearance of the exalted Christ.[15] Instead this gospel ends with a cry of unqualified agony: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" followed by the confused astonishment of Jesus' disciples when confronted by an empty tomb.

Where Mark targeted gentile followers, the gospel of Matthew was directed toward Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora. Here Jesus is portrayed as a

new Moses, summoned by God out of Egypt (2:13–21) and sent to the Jewish people to establish an authoritative interpretation of the Torah. This gospel makes a point of emphasizing that the goal of Jesus' ministry was not to abolish the Law (5:17–19), but to bring it to completion and full perfection, as anciently established in the commandments to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your mind, and with all your soul" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (22:37–40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Far from implying a relaxation or attenuation of the Law, the rule of love requires redoubled vigilance. Outward conformity is no longer enough; Christians must be pure in intention as well as in deed (5:21–48). Those who would follow Jesus are subject to a more rigorous ethic than imagined by even the most scrupulous adherents of conventional Jewish piety: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20). "For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (7:14).

The gospel of Luke is intended for an educated Greek audience, as shown by its fluent literary style and formal preface, characteristic of ancient historical treatises.[16] Like Matthew, Luke understands Jesus' ministry as the fulfillment of Jewish scripture (4:16–21; 22:37; 24:44). Unlike his counterpart, however, Luke does not regard the real target of Jesus' teachings to be the Jews themselves. From the outset, God's plan was to open a universal path to salvation (2:30–32; 3:4–6). Just like the classical prophets that preceded him, Jesus would be rejected by those to whom he was sent (13:34–35); therefore the divine blessings that were their rightful inheritance would be given to others (20:9–18). From Jerusalem, the gospel would go out "to all nations" (24:47; cf. Acts 1:8).

The gospel of John, the latest and most idiosyncratic of the named gospels, is the product of a distinctive school tradition. Here the narrative of Jesus' life has passed through a period of intensive theological reflection and development, reemerging as the story of a preexistent divine being who has come down from heaven and assumed human form in order to redeem lost humanity. Within this gospel, Jesus acts not as a messenger dispatched by God to announce salvation, but as the source and substance of salvation itself: he is "living water," "the bread of life," "the light of the world," "the way, the truth, and the life" (4:10; 6:35; 8:12; 14:6). In short, Jesus is God's self-revelation to the world. To see him is to behold God; to listen to him is to hear God; to believe in him is to know God; to reject him is to reject God. "No man comes to the Father except through me," for "I and the Father are one" (14:6; 10:30).

Clearly the four recognized gospels do not present us with a single congruent narrative or unanimous point of view. Far from being unusual or problematic, this plurality is a typifying feature of the New Testament.

THE LARGER DIVERSITY

The distinct perspectives encapsulated in the four named gospels are the most visible manifestation of early Christian diversity, but by no means do they exhaust its astonishing scope. In addition to these documents, the New Testament is aware of several other gospels which were accepted as authoritative by various Christian groups. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul mentions no less than three, all decades older than Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.[17]

The most influential of these was the "gospel for the uncircumcised"—a gospel of grace and freedom which Paul preached to the gentiles (Gal 2:7; Rom 1:5). This gospel is, of course, the implicit subject of Paul's letters. According to Paul himself, the essence of his message was "Christ crucified," understood as the central rationale and ultimate basis of salvation (1 Cor 1:23; 15:3). Prior to this event, all humanity was in thrall to the power of sin (Rom 5:12–21). Through his willing sacrifice, however, Jesus had discharged the penalty of death exacted from all transgressors and thereby opened a new path to salvation (Rom 3:24–25). To those who accepted this gift, a justification based on the "works of the Law" was no longer required; instead the believer was "justified by faith" (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:11). Compared to this central truth, the deeds and sayings of the historical Jesus seemed of little importance; Paul seldom mentions either. Within his gospel, what matters are not the biographical facts of Jesus' career, but the spiritual significance of his death and resurrection.

Directly opposed to Paul's teaching was another, which the apostle derogatively characterized as an "alien gospel" (Gal 1:6; 2:4). Like the later Ebionites, the faction that espoused this gospel saw in Jesus the promised Messiah, but interpreted his mission within the conventional framework of the Torah. A strict adherence to Jewish custom, including circumcision and dietary restrictions, was considered essential to salvation (Acts 15:1, 5). Because of its reliance on "the works of the Law" rather than on grace alone, Paul was vehemently opposed to this teaching, even going so far as to wish that those who imposed circumcision on gentile converts "would castrate themselves" (Gal 5:2–12; 3:1–14). Nonetheless, the doctrine promoted by Paul's opponents seems to have been normative for the primitive church in Jerusalem, perhaps with a better claim to fidelity than his own. Though now perceived as "alien," this gospel was likely based on the post-Easter community order of Jesus' earliest disciples, who were, of course, all observant Jews (cf. Gal 2:12–13).

Paul mentions yet another gospel—labeled the "gospel for the circumcised"—which he attributes to the apostle Peter (Gal 2:7–9). Paul regarded this teaching as compatible with his own, though differing in emphasis and intended audience. Its specific content is not known, but Peter's gospel

appears to have served as a bridge between the religious conservatism of the circumcision faction and the radical reductionism advocated by Paul. Though directed specifically to Jews, Peter's gospel was apparently broad enough to accommodate gentiles, as indicated by his celebrated vision, during which he heard a voice from heaven declare: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts10:9–35; cf. Matt 10:5–6). Based on this dramatic pronouncement, gentiles were henceforth accepted within the community of believers.

Finally, we have the oldest known gospel, namely the "good news" proclaimed by Jesus himself. To the extent that it can be reconstructed, this version is strikingly different from all of its successors.[18] Where later evangelists proclaimed Jesus as the long awaited eschatological King, Jesus announced the arrival of a divine kingdom (Mark 1:15). The target of his preaching was the "poor," understood not in strictly economic terms, but more generally as the socially and religiously disenfranchised (Luke 6:20–21; Matt 5:3–12; 21:31c). Though currently marginalized and oppressed, these "poor" would soon rejoice, for the existing hierarchy would be inverted within the coming world order: "the last will be first and the first will be last" (Matt 20:16). On that day, "those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11; cf. 1:51–53). Clearly this was not a message designed to affirm the status quo. Nor was it a theoretical objective, to be realized in the distant future: even at that moment, the kingdom of God was "in your midst" (Luke 17:21), forcefully breaking into the human realm, as demonstrated by the power of Jesus' words and deeds (Luke 11:20; 6:18–19). His personal role within that kingdom was, however, never clearly defined. Jesus may have thought of himself as a prophet (Mark 6:4; Matt 21:11) or as a teacher (Mark 12:14–33; Luke 6:39–45).[19] There is little credible evidence that he claimed to be the Messiah and none whatsoever that he believed himself to be God incarnate.

These disparate versions of the gospel all appear within the confines of the New Testament. But this too is only a small, selective slice of the montage. Though the variety of viewpoints contained within the canon is truly remarkable, the diversity manifest there is slight compared to the full range of early Christian writings. Over the last 150 years, a wide assortment of Christian gospels, letters, apocalypses, and homilies have been discovered in ancient libraries or extracted from dry sand. Many others are mentioned or excerpted in the tracts of the church fathers. Altogether, as many as thirty gospels are known to have circulated during the first four centuries of the Christian era, with many more presumed lost. Based on the texts now available to modern scholars, it has become clear that the books of the New Testament do not comprise a representative sampling of all Christian writings, but rather a curated anthology, limited to those documents thought to be "orthodox" or "right-thinking." The books that were excluded represent a much broader spectrum of spirituality, as reflected in their titles. Among

the Christian apocrypha, we find gospels attributed not only to well-known saints such as Peter and Matthew, but also to less prominent apostles such as Bartholomew, Thomas, and Phillip, as well as to various heretics such as Basilides and Bardesanes. Even Mary Magdalene and Judas each had a gospel!

THE WRECKAGE OF WAR

Considered as a whole, early Christian tradition encompasses an enormous range of belief and praxis.[20] In some documents, Jesus' death and resurrection are central; other texts deny that these events have any real significance for salvation; some assert that Jesus never died. Some gospels portray Jesus as a pre-existent divine being, coextensive with God; some think of him as a purely human figure, who was adopted as a "son of God" at his baptism; others expressly deny any relationship, filial or otherwise, with the God of the Hebrew Bible. In some writings, the apocalyptic day of wrath is imminent; in others, the historical consummation of God's plan has receded into the remote future; in others still, the kingdom of God has already appeared, though unrecognized by the ignorant. Some Christian texts presuppose one God; others speak of two opposed Gods; some list dozens of distinct manifestations of divinity.

This diversity bequeathed a richness and breadth to Christian tradition that could never have been attained through unanimity. The inclusion of heterogeneous belief systems not only expanded the range of concepts available to theologians and preachers, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the ongoing synthesis of those traditions generated a dialogue between otherwise isolated perspectives that had developed independently in divergent socio-political contexts. The resulting agglomeration provided a vast repertoire of religious percepts and illustrative stories that the church could draw upon in support of its mission.

But of course that coin has a flip side. Though providing breadth, diversity also brought conflict, often bitter and protracted. As the number of competing gospels multiplied, disputes over the appropriate parameters of faith inevitably arose.

Fault lines are evident as far back as we can trace the development of Christian tradition. Even during Jesus' career, we hear of rivalry and dissension among his disciples (e.g., Luke 9:46). Undoubtedly some of the conflicts mentioned in the gospels are a retrospective projection of later disputes, but it is likely enough that some originated among the apostles at an early period. As the church grew, the magnitude and intensity of the disagreements also grew. The particular issues at stake in these disputes varied according to circumstance, but the root cause was inherent to the basic premises of the new religion, as progressively formulated and refined within the ecclesiastical circles that would ultimately dominate Christianity.

Among proto-orthodox Christians, the central concept of "faith" meant much more than general confidence in the fulfillment of God's promises or assent to the principle of a single, universal deity. Faith had a specific content which could be precisely formulated in a creedal statement.

This was a new development in religious thought. No other Greco-Roman religion required its adherents to subscribe to a particular set of beliefs, let alone a comprehensive confessional checklist such as the Nicene Creed. It was generally agreed that what the gods demanded was personal loyalty, not doctrinal affirmations. Proto-orthodox Christians were the first to depart from that implicit consensus by insisting that right belief was prerequisite to a relationship with God.

Once it had been decided that correct doctrine was crucial to salvation, a tolerant attitude toward other belief systems became impossible. This applied not only to pagan religions but also—indeed especially—to other strains of Christianity. Out of the multitude of voices proclaiming the Christ, only one profession of faith could be valid. All others were not merely false, but deceptions spun by Satan himself. The central idea of "faith" thus became at once a unifying construct among like-minded believers and an exclusionary concept for everyone else.

Far from being a time of harmonious agreement, the early history of the church was a litany of dispute. Church leaders argued continuously over issues such as the minimum prerequisites for salvation and the nature and scope of Christ's divinity. The criteria distinguishing true doctrine from false were not obvious and were often decided only after prolonged, acrimonious debate, sometimes ending in permanent schism. At stake were fundamental questions about the identity and purpose of the new community. The answers to these central questions would determine not only what Christianity is, but equally important, what it is not. Out of the ensuing controversy, ideological boundaries gradually emerged, establishing a fixed line separating "us" from "them."[21]

As a result, virtually all parts of the New Testament have a polemical edge. In some instances, such as the book of Revelation, that edge is large, bloody, and savagely wielded; in others, such as the epistles of John, the blade is partly concealed behind an appeal to love and unity, but no less sharp for all that. Opposition to perceived falsehood drove the composition of these documents just as much as the desire to proclaim the "good news."

The New Testament is not so much the sourcebook of a tidy, well-defined religious system as a battlefield strewn with the wreckage of ideological warfare. The canon is the flotsam of a community in churn, the literary detritus of strife and struggle. A coherent, seamless synthesis would be achieved in time, but not within the scope of the New Testament itself. Not until the fourth century, after the conversion of the emperor Constantine and consequent establishment of a state-sponsored religion, was a cogent, universal creed attained.

NOTES

1. Judaea (Acts 9:31–43); Samaria (Acts 8:5–12, 25; 15:3); Damascus (Acts 9:19–22); Antioch (Acts 11:19–26). Though selective and highly stylized, the account in Acts appears to be generally reliable. The spread of the Jesus movement to these areas is indirectly corroborated by Paul's letters: Judea (1 Thess 2:14; Gal 1:22); Damascus (Gal 1:17; 2 Cor 11:32); Antioch (Gal 2:11).

2. Acts 11:19–21; 13:1–5, 12–14; 14:6–7, 20–25.

3. Acts 16:9–13; 17:10–12; 18:1–5; Rom 15:19, 28.

4. Acts 28:14–16; Rom 1:7. Tacitus indicates that by 64 CE, Christians were present in Rome in sufficient numbers to constitute an identifiable class of persons (*Annals* 15.44.2–8).

5. K. Hopkins, "Christian Number and Its Implications," *JECS* 6 (1998), pp. 185–226.

6. J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp. 372–74.

7. The following contrast between Ebionites and Marcionites is largely derived from B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, pp. 99–109. See also H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 200, 328–34.

8. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5.3; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 29.7; 30.2, 18.

9. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.18.5–6.

10. For a succinct summary of Marcion's teaching, see K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 314–16; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 8–9.

11. Justin, *1 Apology* 26.

12. B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p. 109.

13. The following gospel summaries are indebted to B. Ehrman's clear and evocative overview in *The New Testament*, pp. 75–184.

14. Mark 15:39; cf. 8:27–33; 9:30–32.

15. The original account ends with Mark 16:8. The last twelve verses of the gospel as it now appears in the New Testament are a later addition that is not found in the earliest manuscripts.

16. H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 1, p. 110.

17. J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp. 23–24.

18. On the disjunction between Jesus' self-understanding and the Christ proclaimed by the early church, see J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp. 203–31.

19. See the discussion in H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 77–79.

20. For a succinct but informative depiction of early Christian diversity, see B. Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Doubleday, 1987), pp. xvii–xxi. The following exposition is loosely based on B. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, pp. 1–7.

21. See A.Y. Collins, "Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), pp. 308–20.

Chapter Three

Schism and Heresy

THE GNOSTICS

One particular facet of early Christian diversity is crucial to our discussion, and that is the historical phenomenon generally subsumed under the label of "Gnosticism" or "Gnosis." There is substantial internal evidence—which we shall consider in due course—that John's vision emerged out of a heated conflict between gnostic and proto-orthodox groups. For that reason, the book of Revelation cannot be rightly understood without reference to this important strand of early Christian thought.

The word "Gnosticism" is itself a relatively recent construct: no religion by that name existed in antiquity.[1] Indeed, the groups commonly lumped together under that label would have been surprised to find themselves regarded as a single entity. In most cases, gnostics identified themselves as Jews or Christians or—perhaps more typically—as followers of a charismatic leader, such as Basilides, Valentinus, or Mani. Individual members of the group were "gnostic" in the sense that they claimed to possess a particular kind of knowledge, but this was not the primary basis of group identity.

Because of its imprecision and polemical overtones, the term "Gnosticism" has in recent years come under heavy fire.[2] Many of the concerns expressed in those criticisms are valid. Any scheme that bundles all gnostics in one category will necessarily obscure important distinctions, an observation that applies to Christians and Jews of that period as well. The boundaries between these groups remained soft and permeable through the end of the first century and well into the second.

Nonetheless, the label does have a certain utility and for that reason will be retained. Any intelligible discussion of a complex historical phenomenon requires some level of simplification and generalization. As used here, however, the category refers not to a discrete religion with sharply defined edges, but to a meandering stream of tradition. As it flowed though time and

place, Gnosticism assumed a multiplicity of forms, all the while remaining loosely interconnected by a common origin and broad fund of shared assumptions.

Though the comprehensive term "Gnosticism" has been provisionally retained, our immediate purposes call for a narrower focus. One variant is particularly relevant to the book of Revelation and that is Sethian Gnosticism, sometimes called "classical" Gnosticism because of its apparent historical priority. The ancient texts grouped under that heading exhibit a distinctive mythology and iconoclastic perspective that directly relate to certain facets of John's vision.

The designation "Sethian" is based on the status of Seth as the progenitor of the group that created, maintained, and elaborated this body of tradition.[3] Seth was the third son of Adam, granted to Eve as a replacement for the murdered Abel. From his father, Seth was said to have received the "image of God" which had been imprinted in Adam at the creation.[4] This innate pattern Seth had in turn transmitted to his "seed," who thereby bore within themselves the very likeness of God. In some versions of the tradition, Seth has been elevated to a heavenly savior, who periodically descends into the material world to awaken his spiritual descendants to their true nature and illuminate the path leading back to the divine Father whose image they bear.[5]

As with all known forms of Gnosticism, Sethian texts are characterized by a prolific mythopoeia. Rarely do the writings within this line of tradition refer to anything that we would recognize as a feature of mundane reality. The focus falls almost entirely on primordial episodes and the organization of the divine realm. Contemporary events are seldom mentioned and clearly of little interest.

This otherworldly focus is fundamental to the gnostic world view. The Sethian elect located themselves outside history, within the realm of transcendent knowledge. The domain of social, economic, and political action lay beyond their purview, being extraneous to the purpose and scope of existence as they understood it. What we consider "real," they regarded as a false and degraded semblance, an "emptiness." The really real was to be found elsewhere, in another sphere of being.

THE SECRET BOOK OF JOHN

Though formally similar to other ancient origin stories, gnostic myth is atypical of its genre due to a pronounced speculative tendency. As a rule, ancient myths emerged organically from a particular sociopolitical context and did not, for that reason, represent a system of conscious thought so much as a symbolic narrative based on collective experience. For the most part, these were a stable, conservative form of religious expression that evolved only slowly, as the underlying circumstances of the culture changed. The gnostics, in contrast, varied their myths continually, both through creative embellish-

ment and by incorporating ideas drawn from other traditions.[6] Myth, for them, was not so much a fixed truth as a means of communicating awareness. Because of this penchant for innovation, Sethian myths had recurring themes and motifs, but no single definitive form. There was no fixed gnostic canon, accepted by all followers.

One particular book does, however, stand out as an especially characteristic expression of the Sethian world view. Based on the disproportionately large number of copies found, the *Secret Book of John* appears to have circulated widely among gnostic groups, where it apparently held acknowledged scriptural status.

With some qualifications, that document can be regarded as the gnostic equivalent of a Christian gospel, or more precisely, as a sort of anti-gospel in which normative Christian theology is systematically inverted. The notion of humanity's primeval transgression and subsequent debasement—central to Paul's version of the gospel (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:20–22)—is here turned upside down. According to the *Secret Book of John*, it was not Adam but God who committed the "original sin."

A basic knowledge of this classic Sethian work will prove helpful as we proceed.[7] The following is a highly abbreviated retelling of the *Secret Book of John*, boiled down to its key elements:

> In the beginning there was pure consciousness, undivided and borderless—the ineffable God beyond all manifest gods. Within that infinite totality, a thought spontaneously emerged, creating a duality of being in which a discrete concept assumed form within undifferentiated awareness. The First Thought was at once a female principle, complementary to the primal Father, and a sexually transcendent being, "thrice male" and "Mother-Father" to all. Together the original Mind and First Thought brought forth a third generative principle, manifest as a divine Son who was nonetheless "self-begotten," complete within himself. The primordial divine triad—the supreme godhead of the gnostic pantheon— thus came into being.
>
> The "Only Son" then established the eternal realms of the four luminaries—Harmozēl, Ōroiaēl, Daueithai, and Ēlēlēth—together with a series of lesser emanations, each the expression of a divine attribute, such as "Truth," "Intelligence," "Form," "Peace," or "Love." The last of these emanations to appear was "Wisdom" or Sophia.
>
> Despite her name, Sophia was rash, due perhaps to her locus at the far end of the chain of divine being. In violation of fundamental cosmological principles, the goddess tried to create an emanation on her own, without the participation of her male counterpart. The result was disaster, a profound breach in the divine world. Without the contribution of her consort, Sophia produced an "abortion"—a monster, deformed and incomplete. Embarrassed and ashamed, the goddess removed her defective progeny from the realm of light and placed him within an obscuring cloud.

> The fruit of Sophia's tragic mistake was named Yaldabaoth. Unaware of the full scope of the divine world, the ill-begotten deity proclaimed that he was the one and only God, "jealous" of his exclusive prerogatives. In unconscious imitation of the upper realms, Yaldabaoth produced twelve archons or "rulers," five to reign over the underworld and seven to rule over the seven heavens. These in turn created 365 angels to implement their decrees.
>
> Having established the organization of the lower heavens, Yaldabaoth next brought the material world into being. However, the resulting realm displayed the limitations of its creator, for it too was defective and incomplete.
>
> Yaldabaoth then gathered his minions and declared, "Come, let us create a human after the image of God, with a likeness to ourselves." Accordingly, the archons created Adam, patterned after a luminous image that had appeared on the surface of the waters on the day of creation. That image was not, however, based on the reflected likeness of Yaldabaoth, but on that of the heavenly Adam, the "Perfect Man." In creating humanity, the archons unwittingly drew on a transcendent archetype representing a higher order of being.
>
> Recognizing that their creature was superior to themselves, the archons conspired to suppress his inner nature and bind him to the material world. Together they created the physical body, thereby enclosing the "image of God" in a prison of flesh. The archons then placed Adam in paradise but forbade him to eat from the tree of knowledge, lest he discern the truth of his situation.
>
> Soon afterwards, Yaldabaoth formed another creature, a woman who bore within herself the likeness of the First Thought, and therefore had the innate capacity for enlightened insight. Eve persuaded Adam to partake of the fruit of "perfect knowledge," and the pair became aware of their true nature as divine beings. Infuriated, Yaldabaoth expelled Adam and Eve from paradise and cloaked the minds of his creatures in "thick darkness." To further chain them to the material world, the Creator implanted sexual desire in the primordial pair. Made to "drink the water of forgetfulness," humanity soon ceased to remember who they truly are or from whence they came.

In its full rendition, the myth recounted in the *Secret Book of John* is extraordinarily ornate, incorporating a vast array of divine beings and multiple layers of reality stacked in a towering cosmological construct. For most readers today, this is a thought world that is neither credible nor relevant. The myth is the product of a baroque archaic imagination that is no longer fully accessible to the modern mind.

The details therefore need not detain us. For our purposes, what matters is not so much the specific content as the existential stance disclosed within the story.[8] Like all origin myths, the Sethian tale explains how the human condition arose, with all its constraints and possibilities.

In contrast to the biblical version of the creation story, the world pictured in the *Secret Book of John* is far from being "very good." Instead of a triumph

of divine power and craftsmanship, the creation is a disaster, a cosmic farce produced in error rather than through conscious design.

The resulting universe has two mutually exclusive poles of existence. At one end is the "fullness" [*plerōma*] inhabited by the divine triad and eternal aeons. This is the arena of spirit, the realm of pure essence and self-sufficient completeness. At the other end is the "deficiency" [*kenoma*] or "mindlessness" [*aponia*] inhabited by Yaldabaoth and his creatures. This is the realm of matter, of carnal desire and hollow imitation.

The Sethian story of creation is thus an epic of devolution, a progressive decline from original wholeness to the messy plurality of physical existence. Beginning with the First Thought, every subsequent divine emanation is a detached fragment of the primordial monad, each farther removed from the ultimate source of all existence. Wisdom, which mediates between the human and divine worlds, stands at the outmost margin of that domain, still luminous, but prone to misjudgment. Beyond the boundary demarcating spirit from matter lies the realm of everyday human experience, plunged in darkness and oppression.

THE ALIENS

As depicted in the *Secret Book of John*, the human condition is inherently one of ignorance and severe constraint. This perception is pervasive throughout the corpus of Sethian literature, as well as in later formulations of the gnostic world view. In the high gnostic systems of the second and third centuries CE, this existential circumstance was variously characterized as drunkenness, blindness, sleep, death, or forgetfulness, the common element being that of numb incomprehension.[9]

Amid the oblivious many, however, dwell a cognizant few. These are the gnostics—"those possessing knowledge"—who, having awakened from the universal slumber, recognize the existential nightmare for what it is and boldly subvert it.

The metaphor of "stranger" or "foreigner" evokes the situation of the gnostic elect.[10] A foreigner is someone out of context, a person who lives in a place where he or she does not belong. In the same way, those who had obtained *gnōsis* were spiritual refugees in a world dominated by stupidity and violence, a world that did not share their values or acknowledge their divine potential. Bereft of sheltering delusions, the gnostics lived as exiles, temporary residents of a location and time with which they had no innate connection. Unable to fully participate in their immediate cultural milieu, yet far removed from their celestial home, they dwelt in a place in-between, a purgatory of frustration and patient endurance.

This profoundly alienated sensibility pervades nearly every facet of the Sethian world view. It is implicit, for example, in a curious inability to find

any value or beauty in the universe as found. From a gnostic perspective, nothing in the material domain has intrinsic worth—neither flowers nor sunsets nor sandy beaches nor starry skies. Humanity dwells in a wasteland devoid of interest or hope.

This disaffection extended beyond the natural world to include the moral and political realms. Lacking any stake in the present or commitment to the future, the gnostics felt no responsibility to ameliorate the human condition. In the Sethian version of the Genesis story, suffering enters the world not because of sin and disobedience on the part of humanity, but due to bungling and arrogance on the part of the gods. Though Adam and his descendants experience the ill effects of those errors, they are not themselves the cause of the fallen state of the cosmos. Insofar as blame can be assigned at all, that belongs entirely to heaven. Humanity suffers due to circumstances that it did not create and cannot control. Neither social reform nor individual exertion can remedy the resulting misery. The only available relief comes through escape to a higher realm of existence.

Perhaps the most telling expression of the gnostics' alienation was their self-designation as "the kingless race."[11] Having been liberated through knowledge, the Sethians belonged to the undominated ones, those who have thrown off the yoke of sovereignty. The scope of rebellion certainly included earthly governments, but gnostic resistance extended beyond political manifestations of oppression to include the sacred archetypes that promote and sustain tyranny. Chief among these was the idea of God enshrined in the cult. The God of normative belief and worship was a fraud perpetrated on the unaware, a vast deception designed to keep humanity in thrall.

Many Jews and Christians would have agreed with the latter assessment, for the dominant religious institutions of that era were state-sponsored pagan cults. But the gnostic critique was not directed at any ordinary deity. The malformed, brutish creator pictured in the *Secret Book of John* is a transparent caricature of the biblical God. The name Yaldabaoth is reminiscent of the Hebrew *Yahweh Sabaoth*, "Yahweh of Hosts," and may well be derived from that epithet. In any case, his ultimate identity as the God of the Jews is never in doubt.

The Sethian portrait of the biblical God is a graphic refutation of conventional piety, related in narrative form. The god depicted there is neither great nor noble nor compassionate nor just. Far from being the Creator of all things, Yaldabaoth has produced only a defective imitation of the full glory realized in the plerōma. Nor is this god to be regarded as the "Most High," the supreme Lord of heaven and earth. Sethian myth reveals his real status as the lowest of the low, a deformed bastard and petty tyrant operating outside the bounds of true divinity. Even monotheism, which the Jews considered the highest form of religion, is there shown to be a false premise, based on arrogant presumption and sheer ignorance of the manifold expressions of divinity.

The full measure of Sethian contempt is evident from two alternative names given to Yaldabaoth. According to the *Secret Book of John*, the Creator is also known as Saklas ("Fool") and Samael ("Blind God").[12] The latter was current among Jews as the name of the angel of death, later equated with Satan. The Sethians themselves do not appear to have made that particular connection. For them, Yaldabaoth was not so much the incarnation of evil as an arrogant, mindless brute. Nonetheless, the door leading to that identification was left wide open and would, in time, be taken.[13]

The scope of gnostic rejection did not end with the Jewish God. The same emphatic scorn was extended to the dominant personalities, central institutions, and sacred rites portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. At some point in the Sethian corpus, virtually every Jewish authority figure—including Moses, David, the biblical prophets, and the Israelite patriarchs—is derisively dismissed as a pawn of Yaldabaoth, an unwitting collaborator in the enslavement of humanity.[14]

In the Sethian retelling of events, the true heroes of biblical epic are not those who obeyed, but those who rebelled. We are told, for example, that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed not because they were wicked but because they dared to "bear witness to the universal teaching" revealed to the descendants of Seth.[15] Similarly, some gnostic groups regarded the Edenic snake—guardian of the tree of knowledge—not as the voice of evil enticement but as a benevolent "instructor" who had brought gnostic awareness to humanity in defiance of the archons' prohibition.[16] Through this sort of contrarian exegesis, the Sethians systematically transformed the villains of biblical narrative into models of gnostic virtue.[17]

In some respects, the Sethian world view can be understood as the inverse of religious convention. Moral percepts that traditional Jews valued highly, the Sethians scorned as stupidity. Deeds that Jews abhorred as evil, the gnostics celebrated as liberation. Accordingly, to enter the cosmos portrayed in the *Secret Book of John* is to encounter Judaism turned upside down, where what was formerly truth and holiness has now become falsehood and defilement. Little wonder that some observers regarded gnostic teaching as "an abyss of madness and blasphemy!"[18]

Nonetheless, not everything Jewish has been rejected. When the primal Father of gnostic speculation is carefully scrutinized, it soon becomes apparent that this too is very much a Jewish God. Jews of that era commonly thought of the deity in relentlessly transcendent terms, existing beyond the scope of human thought, lofty and far removed from the realm of everyday affairs. To bridge the gap, the intervening distance was populated with various mediators, including angels, Wisdom, and the Messiah. All this is not unlike what we find in Sethian myth, with its remote "unknown God," heavenly saviors, and prolific succession of divine emanations.[19]

Gnosticism is not truly the antithesis of Judaism; rather this is Judaism bifurcated and polarized. The traditional monotheistic concept of God has been split and segregated into two opposed spheres of being.[20] One might say that Yaldabaoth and the gnostic Father are twins, conceived in the same womb, but separated at birth and reared by warring factions. In the same way, Judaism and Gnosticism are closely related in their underlying assumptions, even though radically opposed in surface manifestation.

A WIDENING DISPUTE

The many commonalities linking Jewish and gnostic ideologies may explain, in part, why Gnosticism and Christianity were also intertwined from an early period. Both of these religions were derived from Judaism; both had rejected some aspects of that heritage and had split off to develop a separate identity. Most importantly, both were focused on a savior figure: Seth for the gnostics, Jesus for the Christians. A convergence of the two groups was perhaps inevitable, given their many shared assumptions and parallel circumstances.

In any case, it is certain that a brief affiliation and mutual exchange of ideas did in fact occur.[21] As early as 50 CE, we hear of gnostic Christians within the churches founded by the apostle Paul. These Christians are said to be "puffed up" by their knowledge, and therefore consider themselves free from the constraints of conventional morality (1 Cor 8:1, 7–10). Having been baptized by the Spirit, they already have attained the resurrection to life (1 Cor 15:12).

Though Paul explicitly rejected some tenets of gnostic ideology, he seems to have selectively adopted others. When, for example, the apostle declares that his gospel is predicated on "the deep things of God"—a "wisdom not of this age nor of the rulers [*archontōn*] of this age"—he almost certainly draws on concepts original to his gnostic opponents.[22] Later gnostic expositors recognized the affinities between their teaching and that of the apostle, and drew extensively on his letters to illustrate and expound their own ideas, much to the dismay of proto-orthodox church officials.[23]

Gnostic influence is even more pronounced in the gospel and three epistles traditionally attributed to the apostle John.[24] Here the borrowing is not random and superficial but systematic and deep, especially evident in the ontological polarities characteristic of the Johannine books: light versus darkness, above versus below, truth versus falsity, flesh versus spirit, the redeemed versus the "world."[25] Here too we encounter a characteristically gnostic form of revelation discourse, consisting of a series of self-disclosures which begin "I am . . ."[26] In the gospel of John, Christ is presented as the pre-existent heavenly redeemer of gnostic lore, come down to earth to reclaim his own (John 3:13, 31; 6:38). The only distinctively Christian element in these writings

is their insistence that the redeemer came in the "flesh," fully incarnate with everything that entails, including suffering and death.

Gnostic ideas were profoundly influential in the development of Christian theology, both positively, through the inclusion of a well-developed soteriology that enriched and expanded the scope of Christian thought, and negatively, by provoking a severe reaction that constricted and delimited the domain of allowable speculation. Both aspects of that influence, the positive and the negative, were foundational to the church, so much so that no other ideology—excepting only Judaism—had so great an impact on the formation of Christianity.

Despite their pervasive influence, the gnostics are remembered within church tradition not as contributors, but as especially notorious examples of heresy. This perception is due, in large part, to the fact that until relatively recently the religious teachings of these contrarians were known almost exclusively through the polemical tracts of their bitterest enemies. Several of the church fathers devoted lengthy tomes to this topic. The list of heresiologists includes such notables as Justin Martyr, Clement, Tertullian, Origen, Hippolytus, Epiphanius, and above all Irenaeus, whose massive five volume work *Against Heresies* established the basic pattern for all subsequent invective. The main purpose of this effort was to demonstrate that the gnostics were unprincipled liars.

The considerable heat and quantity of patristic polemic is attributable to the closeness of the threat. Unlike other competing religions, Gnosticism was not an external rival, but an enemy within. Initially at least, gnostic Christians do not seem to have formed a sect separate from the apostolic churches. Instead they took communion, read scripture, and participated in formal worship, just like other believers (cf. Jude 4, 12). Where they differed was primarily in the meaning assigned to the gospel, based on what they believed to be superior insight acquired through revealed knowledge.

Gnostic Christians did not, of course, think of themselves as heretics, much less as liars.[27] On the contrary, it was they who were the true followers of Christ.[28] Indeed, some gnostics privately debated among themselves whether it was proper to confer the label of "Christian" upon such obviously unenlightened persons as their proto-orthodox opponents.

The main charge that gnostic Christians laid against their rivals was not heresy but superficiality.[29] The proto-orthodox were not so much wrong as incredibly shallow, never having plumbed the depths of the spiritual life. Simply participating in church ritual was not enough to make one a Christian: "Those who go down into the water and come up without having received anything yet say 'I am a Christian,' have borrowed the name."[30] Nor was it enough merely to make a confession of faith: those Christians who do so "hold on to the name of a dead man," instead of looking to the "living Jesus."[31]

This lack of understanding was pervasive not only among ordinary Christians but also among the leaders of the church: "they call themselves bishops and deacons, as if they had received their authority from God" but in reality were "dry canals," incapable of providing spiritual refreshment. Theirs was an "imitation church," which cannot be compared to the "spiritual fellowship of those united in communion."[32] Though their commitment to the teachings of Jesus was a step in the right direction, the proto-orthodox did not go far enough, having settled on a half-truth instead.

Differences in perspective were particularly acute with regard to four key Christian concepts: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and faith. The gnostics had acquired these points of doctrine from the early evangelists, but had subsequently reinterpreted them in ways that they considered more spiritual and insightful.[33]

For the proto-orthodox, the claim that God was incarnate in Jesus was at bottom an assertion that the Savior was real. Having come in the "flesh," Christ was not an abstract idea or remote presence but a tangible force with the authority and power to effect salvation.

To the gnostics, on the other hand, the very idea of incarnation was nonsensical. Matter and spirit were incompatible, antithetical substances. The Savior could not become a man of flesh and bone without violating his very nature as a heavenly being. Descent, rather than incarnation, was the appropriate metaphor for his entrance into the human realm. Christ had come down through the seven heavens into the material world, but he had never become an integral part of that world, always retaining his essential character as the "spirit of thought, suffused with radiant light."[34]

Similar differences informed each faction's understanding of Jesus' crucifixion. For the proto-orthodox, this was, of course, the central event of the drama of salvation. By offering himself up as a sacrifice, Christ had atoned for human sin and therefore nullified its inexorable consequences. Thus purified and reclaimed, Jesus' followers were now eligible to enter into the kingdom of God.

Beyond its soteriological significance, the passion of Christ bridged the gap between the human and divine worlds, making true communion possible. Not only had the son of God become a corporeal being, but he had also participated in the suffering, despair, and sorrow inherent to human existence. This was a deity who understood what it meant to be born and to die, and for that reason could be expected to temper judgment with compassion.

For the gnostics, in contrast, the appeal of the "unknown God" lay precisely in the fact that divinity did not wallow in the quagmire of material existence, but instead remained pure, undefiled by the blood and slobber of human tragedy. To be sure, there was an inherent contradiction between the

Savior being in the world and yet untainted by it, a problem variously resolved by different gnostic groups.[35] The Sethians generally made a strict distinction between Jesus the earthly man and Christ the heavenly revealer. As they told the story, Christ temporarily assumed the form of Jesus in order to accomplish his mission, but departed once the teaching had been proclaimed. Jesus himself, however, always remained a mortal, with a strictly human origin and destined to perish as all humans must. Therefore it was Jesus who suffered and died on the cross, Christ having already returned to the realm of light. As an eternal being, Christ could not die—to do so would be to violate his very nature as the Son of God.

According to this line of reasoning, the real significance of the crucifixion was not its redemptive value, but its function as a decoy, a sop to satisfy the wrath of the archons. As the scene is pictured in the *Revelation of Peter*, Christ hovers above the cross, a witness to Jesus' agony, but himself unscathed:

> He whom you see above the cross, glad and laughing, is the living Jesus. But he into whose hands and feet they are driving nails is his physical counterpart, which is the substitute. That which they humiliate is his likeness.[36]

Only the physical likeness of Christ suffers and dies. Christ himself laughs because the archons believe that they have destroyed him, when in fact they have killed only the fleshly "model" that they themselves had created.[37] The living one eludes their grasp, having a form and nature that the archons can neither see nor understand.

Like the crucifixion, the resurrection of the dead was a central pillar of Christian theology. Here too, the proto-orthodox emphasized the physicality of the event. Just as Jesus had appeared, suffered, and arisen in the "flesh," so too his followers would rise up bodily from the grave. Tertullian—a prominent champion of orthodoxy—declared that the resurrection encompassed "this flesh, suffused with blood, built up with bones, interwoven with nerves, entwined with veins."[38] Then, as now, many found the notion puzzling: "What, they ask, will then be the use of the cavity of our mouth, and its rows of teeth, and the passage of the throat, and the branch-way of the stomach, and the gulf of the belly, and the entangled tissue of the bowels, when there shall no longer be room for eating and drinking? What will there be for these members to take in, masticate, swallow, secrete, digest, eject? Of what avail will be our very hands, and feet, and all our laboring limbs, when all care about food shall cease?"[39] Recognizing that his claim was at odds with common sense observations such as these, Tertullian insisted: "it must be believed because it is absurd . . . the fact is certain because it is impossible."[40]

The sheer effrontery of this assertion was designed to rebut any attempt to spiritualize the resurrection. As understood by the proto-orthodox, scripture

clearly taught that this would not be an ethereal, other-worldly transformation, but a concrete, visible event.[41] Bodily experience was the only form of experience available to humanity. A purely spiritual rebirth was a chimera, an intellectual abstraction suitable only for the effete. A robust faith demanded a robust, physical resurrection.

Needless to say, the idea of a bodily resurrection appalled the gnostics. The body was a "tomb," a prison that held the spirit captive in the material world. Physical death was not, therefore, an event to be feared, much less reversed. Death brought release from the flesh, allowing the divine "spark" within to ascend to the *plerōma* and reunite with the pure consciousness of the Father.

The gnostics countered the proto-orthodox teaching by asserting that the resurrection occurred *before* death: "Those who say they will die first and then rise are in error. If they do not receive the resurrection while they live, they will receive nothing when they die."[42] Resurrection was not an event reserved for the distant future; rather this was a spiritual transformation that happened in the here and now. Not having experienced that rebirth, the proto-orthodox were already among the "dead." Their hope for a physical resurrection at the eschaton was a futile illusion.

Closely related to the debates over incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection was a continuing struggle to define the proper role of faith. Within primitive Christian communities, the term was used in a variety of contexts, with varying shades of meaning. In its most general sense, faith simply meant trust in God (2 Cor 5:7; Prov 3:5–6). More specific connotations included steadfast commitment (2 Cor 1:24; 1 Thess 3:8), "the assurance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1), and "belief in the Lord" (Acts 9:42; 18:8). In Jesus' sayings, faith is understood as an active and efficacious force: "If you had as much faith as a mustard seed, you could say to this sycamore tree 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea' and it would obey you" (Luke 17:6; 18:42; Mark 4:40–41).

By the late second century CE, the scope of the concept had narrowed considerably. Among proto-orthodox believers, faith in the generic sense had become more specifically "the rule of faith."[43] Salvation depended on conformity to an authoritative doctrine, namely "the one and only truth from the apostles, handed down by the church."[44] The direct, unbroken transmission of teachings from Christ to the apostles and from the apostles to their designated heirs, the bishops, was a guarantee of authenticity and truthfulness. Speculation outside those secure boundaries was unnecessary and dangerous:

> Away with the man who is ever seeking because he never finds; for he seeks there where nothing can be found. Away with him who is always knocking because it will never be opened to him; for he knocks where there is none to open. Away with him who is always asking because he will never be heard; for he asks of one who does not hear. (Tertullian, *Prescription* 11)

Instead of continually searching for answers to "unprofitable questions," Christians should rest on the assured teachings of the church: "With our faith, we need no further belief."[45] Those who are truly "wise" will "become a fool to the world, by believing the foolish things of God."[46]

The gnostics, however, were unable to see in "the foolish things of God" anything other than foolishness. Though never fully eclipsed, faith for them was always subservient to knowledge. For it was knowledge, rather than dogmatic belief, that brought salvation.

Insofar as content goes, what the gnostics knew was specifically "whence one is come and wither one goes"[47]—in other words, knowledge of the sacred myths explaining humanity's divine origin and ultimate destination. This knowledge provided the intellectual framework that made liberation possible; without it, the awakening would never have occurred. But beyond its cognitive function, *gnōsis* involved direct experience of the divine, leading to a profound transformation of being: "you saw the Spirit and became Spirit; you saw Christ and became Christ."[48] Having encountered the God without, the gnostic was now able to recognize the God within.

Questioning and doubt were intrinsic to the quest for knowledge. Only when all delusions had been stripped away could one truly behold the "unknown God" beyond thought and belief. Equally important, liberation brought with it a moral responsibility to question the falsehoods inculcated by the archons and their ecclesiastical allies. To leave these unchallenged was to concede victory to the forces of ignorance and consign the rest of humanity to continued slavery. Therefore what was called for was not blind obedience in the name of faith, but outright rebellion, an adamant refusal to concede any ground to the Lie.

WHENCE THEY CAME

What is the historical background of this bizarre and seemingly perverse ideology? Why this vehement rejection of biblical narrative and spiritual norms? The answer to these questions is complex and requires some educated conjecture, but the general outlines are reasonably clear. Gnosticism has both a near and a far historical origin. Evidence for the far origin, though not abundant, is relatively firm. The proximate origin is not as well attested and consequently, the more hypothetical. We begin our investigation there.

As known to modern scholars through the collection of ancient texts now available, Gnosticism is predominantly Christian in orientation. Many gnostic documents bear titles—such as the *Revelation of Peter* or the *Gospel of Philip*—that connect the contents to one of the apostles, and thus to an authoritative source of Christian revelation. The point of such an appeal is, of course, to lay claim to scriptural status within the community of believers.

Yet when one closely examines the corpus of Sethian texts, it soon becomes apparent that here Christian ideology is a thin veneer overlying a body of myth that is intrinsically different from—and at many points profoundly at odds with—the normative teachings of the church. Several Sethian narratives—such as the *Three Steles of Seth*, *Allogenes*, and the *Revelation of Adam*—have no Christian features whatsoever. Others have been converted into Christian documents through editorial redefinition. The *Secret Book of John*, for example, has been Christianized by adding a frame narrative that presents Jesus as the heavenly revealer of the *gnōsis* supplied in the core text.[49] The myth recounted there, however, has no real connection to either the frame narrative or to the life and sayings of Jesus. The text we have now is the result of a cosmetic renovation designed to baptize the contents as Christian.

That this sort of revisionary redaction was a pervasive feature of Sethian literature is decisively demonstrated by the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, which was similarly repurposed. In this case, we have the source document from which the existing version drew, so we can see how this was accomplished by making a direct side-by-side comparison.[50] The *Wisdom of Jesus Christ* was created by dissecting an older Sethian text, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, and inserting the resulting sub-units into a dialogue framework. Segments of the older document are now presented as answers to a series of questions posed by the disciples. The point of this exercise, once again, is to feature Jesus as the revealer of knowledge.

The Christianization of an existing body of scripture implies a break with previous ideological assumptions and the emergence of a new religious perspective. Sethian texts such as the *Secret Book of John* have captured that transition, frozen in words. Not until the emergence of the Valentinian school do we find gnostic tracts that were conceived from the outset as Christian writings. The Sethian material, which comes from an earlier period, was only partially digested and remains unassimilated to the dominant trajectory of Christian thought.

This brings us to our first surmise. Gnosticism is not a specifically Christian phenomenon and did not originate within Christianity, either as a heresy or as a variant.[51] This was only one phase in a long and convoluted history of adaptation and transformation. Gnosticism was already a coherent world view before it encountered Christianity and continued in other forms, such as Mandaeism and Manichaeism, long after it had ceased to have a visible presence within the church.

How then did this alien element become embedded in early Christian tradition? The answer is not difficult to discern: Sethian gnostics recognized in Jesus a manifestation of the "Great Illuminator" described in their own scriptures.[52] This seems to have occurred early during the period of evangelization, followed soon thereafter by a mass conversion.[53] Seeing their

tradition with new eyes, the Sethians took up the Christian gospel and applied it to their own sacred texts. They did not, however, follow Jewish Christians in thinking of Jesus as a Davidic Messiah come to establish a new Israel. For them, Jesus was an embodiment of Seth, the heavenly revealer, who had descended to bring saving knowledge to the elect.

As such, Jesus was only the latest in a long succession of gnostic saviors. Just as Seth was previously incarnate in Zoroaster, Melchizedek, and Zostrianos, so too he had "put on Jesus" as one might wear a garment.[54] Jesus himself was only a temporary manifestation of a far greater and more enduring reality. This was, of course, a point of view bound to cause conflict when confronted with the interpretation concurrently developing in other circles, where Jesus was conceived as the full and unique manifestation of God.

We will have more to say about that dispute in due course. For our present purposes, the Christian phase of Gnosticism can be laid aside as a relatively late development with little to tell us about historical origins. For that, we must turn instead to the core Sethian myths. Most scholars agree that these reflect a heterodox Jewish ideology enriched by Greek philosophical concepts.[55]

Hellenistic influence is evident in several characteristic motifs, but the key contribution was not so much specific ideas as the overarching intellectual framework within which Gnosticism developed.[56] The Sethian texts known to us were originally composed in *koinē*, using Greek categories of thought and modes of expression. Hellenistic culture thus provided the medium in which gnostic ideas were formulated, articulated, and communicated. The most obvious example of this influence is the word *gnōstikos*, a specialized philosophical term—later to become a group label—which the gnostics took up and filled with new significance.

The impact of Hellenistic culture was, however, by no means limited to vocabulary. Greek influence extended beyond word choice to include the deeper assumptions embedded in the semantic structure of thought. This background emerges in subtle ways, such as the characteristic gnostic emphasis on knowledge, conditioned by the Greek ideal of *philosophia* (meaning "love of wisdom"). Without that cognitive framework, Gnosticism would be—quite literally— inconceivable.

One particularly noteworthy area of influence was ontology. Centuries earlier, Plato had posited a fundamental disjunction between ideal form and realized object, or more generally, between the transcendent world of perfected being and the material world of transient becoming. The objects of everyday experience were copies of an eternal, indivisible form, and as such, were inherently derivative and incomplete. The full scope of existence was realized only in the unmanifested ideal. Though invisible to ordinary sight, it was the realm of immaterial form—and not the world of sense impression—that was wholly and finally real.

This notion has clearly shaped gnostic ideas about the structure of the cosmos. Here, as in later strains of Platonism, a radical distinction is made between the realm of pure being inhabited by God and the material world in which humanity exists. In each system of thought, physical reality is conceived as an "imitation" of eternal transcendent archetypes. Thus, insofar as fundamental metaphysical assumptions are concerned, Gnosticism and Platonism were in relatively close alignment. Where the two diverged is in the epistemological implications of those premises.

Late in his career, Plato wrote the dialogue *Timaeus*, in which he constructed a myth of creation to illustrate his theory of ideas. In that myth, the divine creator—called the *dēmiourgos* or "craftsman"—fashions the material world based on a pattern already established in the realm of pure form. The result is changeable and multiform and therefore lacking the immutability and unity of the original. For Plato, however, this defect was due to the inherent limitations of the medium rather than to divine incompetence. Though diluted and imperfect, creation nonetheless retained glimmers of its transcendent ideal.

The gnostics—who unquestionably knew of the *Timaeus*—took up the basic picture of a divine creator as the generative principle behind the material world. Some gnostic texts even retain Plato's terminology and refer to the creator as *dēmiourgos*. But where Plato saw derivation from pure form as a guarantee of intrinsic integrity, the gnostics equated the created world with falsity. For them, the creation was "emptiness," animated by a "counterfeit spirit."

This departure from philosophical norms did not go unnoticed. In antiquity, Plato's writings were not considered a moribund artifact, now irrelevant; on the contrary, this had been the starting point of nearly every philosophical debate for hundreds of years. Whole schools were dedicated to the task of working out the implications of the master's words, methodically drawing out unexpected nuances and enlarging the scope of investigation. But in the specific case of the gnostics, speculation had gone too far. The problem was not that the gnostics invoked the idea of God—the philosophers also did this on a regular basis—but that they had denied the goodness and integrity of the creation. To do so was to call into question the rational coherence of the cosmos, an assumption fundamental to philosophical orthodoxy.

Like the church fathers, Neo-Platonist philosophers were outraged by what they saw as a blatant deviation.[57] In an angry rebuttal, Plotinus asserted that "a part of their doctrine comes from Plato, but all the novelties through which they seek to establish a philosophy of their own have been picked up outside of the truth."[58] His student Porphyry denounced the gnostics as "heretics from the ancient philosophy . . . [who] deceive both themselves and many others, alleging that Plato had not penetrated to the depths of intelligible reality."[59] The philosopher Amelius is said to have written a detailed refutation of forty volumes.

While Hellenic influence is undeniable, it is equally clear that Greek philosophy is not the matrix from which Gnosticism emerged. Key to all gnostic systems is the possession of esoteric knowledge, disclosed through direct revelation. This is not a knowledge built up methodically through objective analysis and rational discourse. Like Christian piety, philosophy is a mold which has shaped gnostic ideology, but it is neither the origin nor the essence of Gnosticism itself. For that, we must probe more deeply.

Several aspects of the core Sethian myth point toward a Jewish origin. First and most obviously, Sethian texts continually allude to persons, episodes, and motifs drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The nature of these references, which are often subtle, presuppose intensive reflection on the meaning of Jewish scripture. And while the language in which gnostic myths were originally framed is Greek, many terms and concepts are distinctively Semitic. This background is readily apparent in the names given to the archons or "rulers" of the seven heavens, who are variously called "Yao," "Adonaios," "Sebaoth," and so on. Most of these terms are loosely based on the traditional titles and attributes of the Jewish God, Yahweh.

Not only is the content largely derived from Jewish sources, but the specific method of expounding scriptural motifs is also distinctively Jewish. The midrashic tradition, in which some aspect of the Torah is taken up and elucidated through analogy and extensive commentary, was by then an established feature of Jewish exegesis. The same kind of discursive reasoning is evident in the way the Sethians elaborated biblical motifs.[60]

A clear example of this exegetical method can be discerned in the group's self-identification as the "seed" or "race" of Seth.[61] Seth himself appears in the Hebrew Bible only as a place marker in genealogical lists. In a brief aside, one such list informs us that Seth was given to Eve as "another child [lit. 'seed']" to replace the murdered Abel (Gen 4:25). Though meager, this morsel of information inspired extensive speculation about the lineage of the other "seed."[62] Particularly relevant to our discussion is a tract titled *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain*, written by the Jewish philosopher Philo. There Seth is described as the "seed of human virtue," a chosen race to which all virtuous persons belonged, in contrast to the "race of Cain," from whom the wicked are descended.[63] As a lover of virtue, Philo naturally thought of himself as belonging to the race of Seth. Through a similar process of extrapolation and analogy, the Sethians arrived at the same conclusion with regard to themselves.[64] This sort of appeal to genealogical legitimacy makes sense only within a Jewish milieu.

The same holds true of the Sethian stance towards scripture. Though interpreted from a vehemently contrarian perspective, the Hebrew Bible retains a powerful emotional hold on the gnostic imagination. The resulting tug-of-war between rejection and affirmation does not proceed from

the casual skepticism of an outsider. No less than Judaism, Gnosticism is sanctioned by holy writ.[65] Only by appealing to scripture could the Sethians validate their claim to constitute the elect. The point in dispute was not the authoritative status of sacred texts, but their proper interpretation and significance. The Sethians rejected normative Jewish teachings precisely because their own world view was erected on the same foundation.

Because of its entrenched anti-Jewish bias, Sethian Gnosticism can hardly be understood as an outgrowth of rabbinical Judaism. That was not, however, the only variety of Judaism then existing.[66] Throughout the Second Temple period, the Jews were a scattered collection of groups with divergent and often conflicting interests. For another example of a separatist Jewish sect with an antagonistic relationship to its parent tradition, the community at Qumran comes immediately to mind—or better yet, the early Christians.

Considerable indirect evidence indicates that Gnosticism originated within Jewish apocalyptic circles.[67] For the most part, these groups existed on the edges of Judaism, outside the dominant institutions of temple and synagogue. By its very nature, apocalyptic eschatology is inherently opposed to established social and religious institutions, which are seen as corrupt and defiled. Some apocalyptic groups, such as the sectarians at Qumran, explicitly included the Jewish elite among those who are to be expunged in the cataclysm preceding the New Age.[68] A shift from apocalyptic damnation to gnostic defiance would not, therefore, have required a large leap; in fact this could be seen as a softening of tone, a relaxation of the fiery rhetoric of the fanatic fringe.

The most obvious link between Gnosticism and apocalypticism is literary genre. Jewish apocalyptic literature generally follows a set format in which an angel or other heavenly being appears to a biblical personality and explains heavenly mysteries. In many cases, the question and answer dialogue is accompanied by a tour of otherworldly realms, during which the various compartments of transcendent reality are disclosed. This same basic pattern underlies many gnostic texts. In these tractates, a revealer—usually Christ, but sometimes other figures such as Derdekeas, "son of the Infinite Light"[69]—appears to an apostle or other recognized authority and explains the transcendent basis of gnostic teaching. That these parallels in form are not incidental is clear from the fact that several gnostic texts are explicitly labeled as an *apokalypsis* or "revelation."[70]

In addition to literary genre, Gnosticism and apocalypticism are closely related conceptually. A recurrent motif in both traditions is the heavenly ascent of a saintly mortal and its reverse, the earthly descent of a heavenly revealer. Also prominent is the role of various biblical patriarchs such as Noah, Cain, Enoch, Seth, or Shem, who variously serve as exemplars of virtue or shame. Both ideologies are focused on the time of origins and its

opposing terminus, the time of the end. The time of the middle—the era in which we now live—is of interest only as a precursor to the glories to come.

Closely related to this disregard for the here and now is a strong mythological orientation, prevalent in apocalypticism and Gnosticism alike. Both traditions inhabit a universe teeming with divine and demonic beings locked in a struggle for dominance. The object of that struggle is humanity, which stands at the center of a vast cosmological drama. The main actors cannot be seen but only intuited, for this is also a cosmos that is tightly compartmentalized, stratified in layers extending from the underworld to the uppermost heaven. To bridge the yawning distance between humanity and the highest God, angelic intermediaries are required. At critical moments in history, these revealers descend to disclose critical information to the community.

Corollary to the idea of a heavenly revealer is the claim to esoteric knowledge, also fundamental to both traditions. The scope and focus of that knowledge is, to be sure, very different: the gnostic has awakened to his or her true nature as a spark of eternal light, whereas the apocalyptic seer has been informed of God's imminent end time plan. Nonetheless, knowledge has the same social function in each case. A shared awareness of who they are and where they are going binds the community of salvation together and cements their identity as the elect. Equally important, this knowledge serves to differentiate the group from the "Other"—those to whom divine secrets have not been disclosed, and who must therefore perish.

The parallels between apocalypticism and Gnosticism go beyond form and theme to include deeper assumptions about reality. Both ideologies are deeply pessimistic about the current state of the world. Existing circumstances are spiritually intolerable and incompatible with the true intentions of God; therefore they must be annulled. So vast is the scope of necessary change, however, that it cannot be effected within history via political action or social reform. The only possible resolution is one that comes from outside the plane of human existence, through divine intervention.

The nature of this intervention differed, as determined by divergent underlying premises. For Jewish apocalyptic groups, salvation was to be realized through a violent supernatural intrusion which would bring the present corrupt era to an end and usher in a new age dominated by a purified and refurbished Israel. For the gnostics, divine intervention would come in the form of a heavenly revealer transmitting saving knowledge, thereby bringing full release from the material world and reabsorption into the realm of divine light. The effective outcome was, however, essentially the same in each case: the existing world would be abolished, history abandoned. Neither group situated its identity within the realm of contemporary human experience. For both, the true destiny of the elect lay elsewhere, in another sphere of existence.

These parallels suggest that apocalypticism and Gnosticism are closely related. The two ideologies share too many assumptions to attribute their similarities to general cultural diffusion. At the same time, one cannot ignore equally fundamental differences in perspective.

A direct linear derivation seems unlikely; instead some sort of intermediate metamorphosis must be assumed. As we have seen, the catalyst for that transformation was provided by Hellenistic culture. Philosophical speculation reshaped Jewish apocalyptic eschatology into the metaphysical mythology we encounter in Sethian texts. The final product is a distinctive fusion of two world views, Greek and Hebrew.

That synthesis will have occurred in one of the great Hellenistic metropolises, which served as the intellectual melting pots of the ancient Mediterranean world. The most likely candidates are Antioch and Alexandria. Both cities had large Jewish populations in immediate proximity and constant dialogue with Greeks. Both cities also emerged as centers of gnostic thought from an early period. In the absence of clear evidence, however, it is not possible to narrow the range of possibilities to a specific locale.

THE FAR HISTORICAL ORIGIN

Though the proximate origin of Gnosticism is shrouded in uncertainty, the corpus of texts discovered at Nag Hammadi represents a terminus rather than the beginning of something entirely new. The world view encapsulated in the *Secret Book of John* is a transient phase of an evolving ideology with roots deep in the past. Based on evidence from the Hebrew Bible, we can follow this manifestation back to a specific initiating event that decisively defined the parameters of the gnostic world view.

That event was the reestablishment of the Jerusalem temple in 516 BCE This was, of course, a major milestone in the history of Judaism as well. One could argue, in fact, that Judaism did not exist prior to then. The seventy years preceding the inauguration of the new temple were marked by crisis, decimation, exile, struggle, and adaptation. Ever since the fall of Jerusalem and the abolition of the Judahite monarchy, the community had lacked a unifying structure and common focus. The reestablishment of the temple cult provided both, thereby bringing to a close the long period of transition between the end of nationhood and the founding of a new kind of religion.

With the return of exiles and the dedication of a modest but well-equipped sanctuary, a stable platform was laid for reasserting a common identity. That identity was, to be sure, no longer based on a political charter as a nation with defined boundaries and central government; instead the Judahites now became the Jews, an international community based on religion, custom, and history. The second temple was the symbolic center of that new universe, a

focal point of communal solidarity and visible proof that God had returned to dwell among his people once again.

That, at least, is the official narrative presented in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai. Other biblical texts, especially the later strata of Isaiah, paint a very different picture.

From the outset, efforts to rebuild the temple met resistance from the "people of the land" (Ezra 4:1–5)—meaning, for the most part, those Judahites who had not been exiled to Babylon. Far from welcoming their former compatriots, many saw the returning exiles as intruders, a perception that the new arrivals, with their preemptory demands and undisguised sense of superiority, did little to dispel. From the perspective of the native population, a certain wariness was well justified: Were these not descendants of the very people whom Yahweh had "cast out" for their wickedness? During the intervening years of exile, the territory of Judah had not, of course, lain empty. The great majority of Judahites had remained in place, and in the absence of the former ruling elite, had formulated their own ideas about God's plan for the future.[71]

One group, which based its self-understanding on the sayings of the eighth century BCE prophet Isaiah, proclaimed that Yahweh would resurrect Israel in a dramatic event that would serve as a universal revelation to all humankind: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low … Then the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together" (Isa 40:4–5). Awed by this public display of divine power, "many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths'" (2:3). The knowledge of God, formerly reserved to Israel alone, would now be extended to all nations. Jerusalem would become the goal of international pilgrimage, "a house of worship for all peoples" (56:7). Even gentiles could aspire to serve as priests in the restored temple (66:21). A new era of peace and understanding would dawn: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea" (11:9).

This vision of the future was not, however, shared by the leaders of the Babylonian *gôlāh*, who openly mocked such notions as pious pipe dreams (Isa 66:5c; cf. 5:19). In their view, holiness was the central principle that was to guide the restoration (Ezek 44:23; cf. Lev 10:8–11). What was required, therefore, was not indiscriminate inclusiveness but rigorous exclusion. The community must be purged, cleansed of the impurities that had caused Yahweh to banish the nation from its sacred homeland. All sources of defilement and pollution must be removed, beginning with everything of foreign origin. Accordingly, the restored community was to "separate all foreigners from Israel" (Neh 13:3; Ezra 9:1ff.). Henceforth the Jews were to become a "holy race," a people apart, purged of alien contamination.

Access to the holy precincts was also to be strictly regulated.[72] Foreigners were, of course, to be excluded altogether. But even within the Jewish community, strict lines of separation were to be observed. The common people were to gather in the outer court to worship Yahweh on Sabbaths and new moons; they were not, however, to pass beyond the gate into the inner court.[73] While discharging their duties as temple servants, the Levites could enter the inner court, but only the Zadokite priests could minister to Yahweh in the innermost sanctum.[74] When leaving the temple, the priests were to remove their sacred vestments, "lest they transmit holiness to the people."[75]

These were by no means disinterested rulings. As the reigning sacerdotal dynasty of the former temple, the Zadokites had a vested interest in reviving the previous status quo. For them, the restoration meant a return to the religious structures that had legitimized and sustained their place in the sacred hierarchy. The cult—and their position within it— represented an eternal world order decreed by God. Their duty was to restore the integrity of that world, to reassert a regime of law and holiness in the midst of the surrounding chaos and filth.

These ambitions were backed by the full authority and military might of the Persian king, who saw in the returning *gôlāh* a means of strengthening imperial rule in this rebellious and disorganized region.[76] The Persian state financed the reconstruction of the temple as well as the ongoing expenses of operating the cult (Ezra 6:3–9; 7:15–22). The temple staff was exempted from paying imperial taxes (Ezra 7:24). The Zadokites, in return, agreed to formally recognize their royal patron as Jerusalem's legitimate ruler. Prayers on behalf of the king and his family were incorporated into the daily liturgy (Ezra 6:10). The temple became, in effect, an official shrine of the Achaemenid dynasty, staffed by servants of the imperial regime (cf. Ezra 7:23).[77]

With their power base in the Jerusalem temple reestablished, the Zadokites began to systematically extend and consolidate their authority. Initially, oversight over the district of Jerusalem was shared with a civil administrator appointed by the Persian king. But when the first governor, Zerubbabel, was implicated in sedition, the office was terminated (Hag 2:20–23). For the next seventy years, until the special commission of Nehemiah, effective control over the district of Jerusalem fell to the priesthood alone. Royal prerogatives, formerly reserved to the Judahite king, were appropriated by the Zadokites, who now became an aristocratic class, with preeminent rank and wealth.[78]

Within a few decades, the sway of the Zadokites had expanded to include every sphere of social existence. Not only did the priests maintain exclusive control over the cult, but they also oversaw secular matters such as tax collection, property rights, and law enforcement. Distinctions between religious rulings and civil law disappeared. Within the district surrounding Jerusalem, the "law of your God and the law of the king" were so closely aligned as to be one (Ezra 7:26). By imperial decree, those who failed to comply

with the priests' decisions were to be punished by imprisonment, banishment, confiscation of property, or summary execution. Based on the bitter complaints of those who suffered the consequences, it would appear that the Zadokites did not hesitate to resort to such measures.

For the group committed to Isaiah's vision of Jerusalem, this turn of events represented a fundamental betrayal of Yahweh's promises, now blighted in the bud. Rather than emerge as an international center of worship (Isa 56:6–8), the temple had become the personal fiefdom of those who "chose that which did not please me" (66:4). The priests, appointed to serve as guardians of holiness, had instead perpetuated the abominations of the pre-exilic cult (66:3, 17). Rather than Jerusalem's glorious vindication "shining out like dawn, her salvation like a burning torch," (62:1), the city was clothed in "spider's webs," woven of "works of iniquity" (59:5–6). The promise of future peace and prosperity (60:11, 18) had been supplanted by the pervasive reality of violence and falsehood (59:3). Earlier prophets had foreseen a glorified Jerusalem in which "your people shall all be righteous" (60:21), but the bitter experience of their later successors showed that "truth is lacking and whoever turns from evil is despoiled" (59:15).[79]

A virulent and rapidly escalating struggle ensued. The visionaries issued a series of ever sharper denunciations coupled with increasingly dire predictions of doom. Those who "did what was evil in my sight and chose that in which I had no delight" would "bow down to the slaughter" (Isa 65:12). Yahweh took no pleasure in the evildoers' temple and would personally act to expunge them from the holy precincts (66:1, 6). Future generations would gaze in horror upon the "dead bodies of the people who have rebelled against me, for their worm shall not die nor their fire be quenched; they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh" (66:24). The priests responded with condescending hauteur and an edict expelling the troublemakers from the cult community (66:5).[80]

The dynamic balance and creative tension between hierocratic and visionary elements, which had been maintained throughout Israel's history to this point, now broke down. The sacred functions of prophet and priest—manifest as vision and institution, forward-looking hope and steadfast fidelity to the past—separated into two distinct, mutually exclusive spheres of activity. The resulting rupture would become a permanent feature of Jewish thought.

The visionaries now found themselves an oppressed and reviled minority within the Jewish community.[81] Severely alienated from a society dominated by a vindictive priesthood with exclusive control over the central cult, the prophetic group began to visualize existence apart from the unrighteous majority. Yahweh would give his faithful servants a "different name"—meaning,

presumably, that they would no longer be called Israel—whereas those who "chose that in which I did not delight" would "leave your name to my chosen as a curse" (Isa 65:15). The promises of bounty and blessing, formerly extended to the nation as a whole, would now be reserved for "my people who have sought me" (65:8–10). The faithful would "sing for gladness of heart" while the evildoers would "wail for anguish of spirit" (65:14).

The development of an alternative identity as Yahweh's chosen "servants" brought with it a steady retreat from any responsibility to existing political and religious structures. Powerless to effect change in a world dominated by their enemies, disillusioned by the repeated failure of the promised salvation to materialize, the visionaries looked instead to an intervention from outside the realm of mundane history. Yahweh would "come in fire, his chariots like the whirlwind, to pay back his anger in fury" (Isa 66:15). What the faithful could not do, Yahweh would personally accomplish on their behalf. However, unlike the classical prophets, who had always specified a concrete historical agent for Yahweh's plans, the post-exilic visionaries increasingly turned to mythological paradigms for their eschatological pronouncements. Fulfillment lay not in the here and now, in a contemporary struggle to improve society and bring forth justice, but in an otherworldly paradise, which Yahweh would bring about in the age to come. Prophecy now transitioned into apocalypticism.[82]

FROM APOCALYPTICISM TO GNOSTICISM

The evidence for the preceding historical scenario has been presented in detail elsewhere[83] and for that reason will not be elaborated here. We will tarry long enough only to establish the main points of connection that link Gnosticism to its historical antecedents in proto-apocalyptic ideology.

The first point of connection is a total and emphatic rejection of the normative Jewish concept of God. This startling denial first emerged in the discourses of the prophet Ezekiel,[84] and was subsequently taken up and elaborated in the later strata of the book of Isaiah.[85] The basis of that repudiation was, however, more sociological than theological in kind. The traditional picture of Yahweh was rejected not because the naysayers had moral or metaphysical doubts about the reality of God, but because that specific concept had been co-opted by their enemies. As the patron deity of the priestly elite, the official God enshrined in the Jerusalem cult was inextricably tied to a power structure that that had systematically persecuted the visionary group.

Finding themselves excluded from all institutionalized sources of authority, the faithful fought back with the only weapon available to them: the word of Yahweh, as transmitted through the oracles of the classical prophets. Through a prolonged process of emendation, reinterpretation, and reapplication, this ostracized minority brought Isaiah's censures to bear on their current plight.

In the past, it was the surrounding nations who had afflicted the people of God; now, however, their tormentors came from a rival faction within the same religious community. Out of the ensuing clash came the inexorable realization that the God who sponsored their enemies was also an Enemy. The "servants of Yahweh" therefore rejected the divine symbol that legitimized the rule of their oppressors, even while retaining a variant form of that same symbol as the basis of their own forthcoming elevation on the day of wrath.

This same emphatic rejection appears in Sethian myth, but there the original rationale has been forgotten. The Sethians viewed the conventional Jewish idea of God with contempt, but no longer remembered the historical basis of their alienation. That scorn was simply part of their tradition, now expressed abstractly in a mythological form, with only traces remaining of the partisan fervor that prompted the initial denial.

What the Sethians did know was that all forms of authority are evil. The result was an entrenched anti-establishment bias, manifest as a series of long-running disputes with various officials, institutions, and dogmas—those of the Greeks and Christians as well as those of the Jews. This contrarian ethic is latent throughout the Sethian scriptures, periodically bursting into the open in remarks such as "Not as Moses said"[86] or "Abraham was a joke, as were Isaac and Jacob."[87] As members of the "kingless race," gnostics were subservient to no authority, either on earth or in heaven.

The second point of connection linking Gnosticism to the post-exilic "servants of Yahweh" is dualism. Sethian gnostics conceived of the universe as irreconcilably split between the material world inhabited by humanity and the purely spiritual world of the unknown God. This rupture was partially mended in later Valentinian theology, but traces of the original dichotomy never disappeared from gnostic thought.

The historical basis of this split was, once again, the breakdown of the Jewish community following the restoration of the Jerusalem temple. In its early phases, the dispute between the visionaries and the priestly elite revolved primarily around social, political, and cultic issues. Where it occurred, dualism was mostly confined to the human realm, as exemplified by the salvation-judgment oracle, a new type of prophetic saying which first appeared during this period.[88] These sayings consisted of two parallel but contrasting announcements in which differing rewards and punishments were selectively applied to different groups within the Jewish community (e.g., Isa 65:8–16).

As time went on, the clash increasingly assumed a cosmological dimension. Just as humanity was divided between the faithful and the idolaters, so too the universe was divided between benign and malevolent powers. On one side of that rift was the "God of Truth," known exclusively to the faithful;[89] on the other side was the God of the deluded, enshrined within the Jerusalem cult (Isa 6:10; 24:14–16). Though it never broke down entirely, Jewish monotheism was now increasingly polarized by the contrasting extremes of heaven and earth, God and Satan, the saved and the damned.

As long as it stayed within the realm of Jewish myth, cosmic dualism remained primarily ethical in orientation. Good and evil each had separate domains, with humanity similarly divided between the righteous and the wicked. Apocalyptic eschatology resolved the tension between these poles by postulating a final consummation that would reunite the moral universe beneath the dominion of God.

As with so much else, that expectation changed with the advent of Hellenistic culture. Under the tutelage of Greek philosophy, the gnostics transformed ethical dualism into an ontological dualism. Instead of the traditional dichotomy of good and evil, the universe was now riven between spirit and matter, fullness of being and empty semblance. Society mirrored the cosmological divide with a parallel rift between spiritual humanity (the "pneumatics") and carnal humanity (the "hylics"). Yet here too an ultimate resolution was foreseen: once all the sparks of divine light had been reabsorbed into the godhead, the material world would collapse into nothingness, leaving only the pure, undifferentiated consciousness of the original monad.

The third point of connection linking Sethian Gnosticism to the schismatic post-exilic visionaries is the use of parody as a tool for subverting normative paradigms. Most Sethian texts are strongly satirical, often passing into open sarcasm. Typically the parody involves retelling an episode from the Bible, but with an inverted perspective and contrary moral conclusion.

This tendency is well illustrated by a distinctive motif which modern scholars have labeled "the arrogance of the Creator." This element appears in a wide variety of gnostic texts, both early and late, with examples from the Sethian,[90] Valentinian,[91] Barbelognostic,[92] and Ophite[93] schools, as well as from polemical summaries of gnostic ideology provided by the church fathers Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius.[94] Beyond doubt, this motif is among the most pervasive and characteristic features of gnostic myth.

The motif is based on an episode in primeval history. Following the creation of the material world, the demiurge is said to have gazed upon his work and "seeing his greatness and only himself and no other apart from water and darkness, thought that he alone existed."[95] Desiring praise for his accomplishment, the demiurge then created subservient divine beings: "the heavens, their powers, and their government were established, and the archcreator exalted himself and was glorified by the entire host of angels; and all

the gods and their angels praised and glorified him. And he rejoiced in his heart and boasted continually, saying 'I have need of no one.' He said, 'I am God and there is no other apart from me.'"[96]

For the gnostics, however, this boast represented the height of presumption. By making such a claim, the Creator not only sinned against higher spiritual powers, but he also displayed a profound ignorance of his true place in the cosmological scheme. That ignorance was a direct cause of the degraded state of the world and as such, emblematic of humanity's enslavement to the forces of mindlessness.

The prominence and wide distribution of this motif suggests that the core idea emerged early in the development of Gnosticism and was subsequently adopted as a sort of motto or defining perspective. The essence of being gnostic was an unwavering refusal to acknowledge claims to singular holiness and omnipotence—even when that assertion was made by the Creator himself.

This refusal can be traced back to a particular person and place. The exilic prophet Ezekiel—perhaps the most trenchant and devastatingly effective satirist ever to have written—lampooned the conventional picture of Yahweh in a series of ingenious "riddles" (*hîdah*) and allegories (*mašal*).[97] Drawing on traditional imagery associated with the temple cult, Ezekiel caricaturized the deity as the great and lofty world tree with its "top reaching to the clouds"; as a primeval king who arrogantly claimed "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas"; as a "great dragon lying amid his streams, who says 'The Nile is Mine, I made it.'"[98]

Though the intermediate links are not known, parallels in language, theme, and intent suggest that many gnostic parodies are derived from Ezekiel's allegories. Both reframe the biblical story of origins by inverting its conventional meaning; both mock the Creator's arrogant claim to exclusivity; both portray the deity as ignorant and presumptuous; both are satirical in method and radically subversive in perspective. We can trace this line of parody from Ezekiel to the earliest stratum of the book of Daniel,[99] a span of perhaps 200 years; after that, the tradition goes underground for an extended period of time before remerging in Sethian parodies of the biblical God. Exactly how this satirical tradition was maintained in the long interval between Alexander's conquest and the emergence of Gnosticism is a matter of speculation,[100] but similar instances of cultural persistence abound in the ancient world, the prime example being the Hebrew Bible itself.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

So what does all this have to do with the book of Revelation? Conflict between visionary and hierocratic groups was not a circumstance unique to Jewish history. As shall become clear, this is a dialectic that would also play out among Christians. Indeed, it is precisely that conflict—and not contrived

genealogies or specious claims to fulfillment of prophecy—that binds the New Testament to the Hebrew Bible. The same underlying clash unites both traditions in a common history of initial heterogeneity, subsequent conflict, victorious orthodoxy, and permanent schism.

During their formative periods, Judaism and Christianity were both riven by multiple competing ideologies, all claiming to represent the authentic voice of the tradition. Though many fissures existed, most were clustered along a central fault line. On one side of that rift were those who advocated hierarchy, conformity, purity, institutional stability, and sacred precedent; on the opposite side were those who endorsed equality, creativity, universalism, reform, and a utopian future.[101]

Unable to find an appropriate balance between these antagonistic perspectives, the nascent Jewish and Christian communities both teetered precariously between the extremes of rigid dogma and radical dissent. In each instance, the conflict ended with the expulsion of the visionary group. The hierocratic party successfully consolidated its hold on power, emerging from the fray in full possession of the official cult and creed. The visionaries did not, however, pass quietly into obscurity. As documented in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, it was they who landed the final knockout blow in the longstanding ideological fight. Drawing on the words of their prophetic predecessors, the dissidents invoked an apocalypse—a massive repudiation from heaven that would obliterate the ordered world manifest in the temple.

NOTES

1. For the historical and linguistic background of the word, see B. Layton, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism" in *The Social World of the First Christians*, L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough, eds., (Fortress, 1995), pp. 334–49.

2. M. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism" an Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton UP, 1996); for a more balanced assessment, see D. Brakke, *The Gnostics* (Harvard UP, 2011), pp. 1–50; for a comprehensive discussion, see K. King, *What Is Gnosticism?*

3. The scope of this corpus was originally delineated by H. Schenke, "The Phenomenon of Gnostic Sethianism" in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, B. Layton, ed., (Brill, 1981), vol. 2, pp. 593–97, 602–7. For an overview, see B. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, pp. 68–79.

4. *Secret Book of John* NHL II 15.1–4; *Revelation of Adam* 64.1–19; cf. Gen 1:26–27.

5. *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHL III 64.1–3; *Revelation of Adam* 76.8–77.18.

6. K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 53–54; R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (Harper, 1966), pp. 11–12.

7. For a succinct literary-critical analysis of the *Secret Book of John*, see B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 61–69.

8. For a brief but illuminating exposition of the basic premises of Gnosticism, see E. Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Abingdon, 1976), pp. 253–77.

9. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 68–73.

10. H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, pp. 49–56. The name Allogenes or "stranger" is an epithet of Seth, who comes from another realm to gather his elect and lead them back to their true home.

11. *Revelation of Adam* 82.19–20; *The Nature of the Rulers* 97.4–5.

12. *Secret Book of John* 11.15–18.

13. An initial step in that direction was made in the gnostic text *The Nature of the Rulers* 95.11–13, where it is said that "an angel bound Yaldabaoth and cast him down into Tartaros, at the bottom of the abyss," a scenario reminiscent of the imprisonment of Satan in Rev 20:1–3.

14. For example, *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 62.27–64.17.

15. *Paraphrase of Shem* 28.34–29.29.

16. *The Nature of the Rulers* 89.31–90.12.

17. See H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 95.

18. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Preface 2.

19. The idea of an "unknown God" is a recurrent theme in gnostic thought. Because the godhead exists beyond thought or physical manifestation, ultimate reality is concealed from humanity (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.19.1; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 6.33; *Gospel of Truth* 18.1–20). Consequently, salvation can be found only through *gnōsis*, which brings knowledge of the Unknowable.

20. B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 104–6; *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, pp. 128–30.

21. See the discussion in K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 148–52.

22. 1 Cor 2:6–15. See G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 178–80; K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 301–2.

23. See *The Nature of the Rulers* 86.20–25; also E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul* (Continuum, 1992).

24. R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox; 1971). Bultmann's argument is inspired guesswork, based on slender evidence; nonetheless, subsequent discoveries have largely confirmed his basic premise. For a more recent discussion, see H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2, pp. 178–98.

25. Some scholars compare the dualism manifest in the gospel of John to that of the sectarians at Qumran; however, the world view implicit in the Dead Sea Scrolls is qualitatively different. The apocalyptic dualism of the Qumran community is based on the dichotomy of good and evil rather than a schism inherent in being itself.

26. E.g., John 6:35–40, 48–51; 8:12–18; 10:7–18; 14:6–7; cf. Thunder, *Perfect Mind* 13.17–14.34; *Trimorphic Protennoia* 35.1–36.26. This form of divine dis- closure is derived from Jewish sapiental tradition, where Wisdom is conceived as a preexistent companion to God. Short apothegms in the "I am" style appear in an early gnostic collection of Jesus' sayings (*Gospel of Thomas* 77, 28, 108); parallels from the synoptic gospels are rare and incompletely formed. The dialogues in the gospel of John are a later, more developed version of this distinctive speech form. See G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 211–17, 260; J. M. Robinson and H. Koester, *Trajectories Through Early Christianity* (Fortress Press, 1971), 177–79.

27. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.15.2. For an illuminating discussion of the controversy between gnostic and proto-orthodox groups, see E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 102–118.

28. *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 59.19–62.26.

29. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.16.4. See B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, pp. 185–88.

30. *Gospel According to Phillip* 64.22–29.

31. *Revelation of Peter* 74.13–14; 81.15–24.

32. *Revelation of Peter* 79.1–31.

33. E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 23.

34. *Revelation of Peter* 83.8–10.

35. See the discussion in K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 157–71.

36. *Revelation of Peter* 81.15–23; cf. *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* 55.30–56.19.

37. See *On the Origin of the World* 103.19–24; *Secret Book of John* NHL II 15.5ff.

38. Tertullian, *On the* Flesh *of Christ* 5 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library).

39. Tertullian, *On The Resurrection of the Flesh* 60 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library).

40. Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 5.

41. An assumption based on a literal reading of Ezek 37:1–10.

42. *Gospel of Phillip* 73.1–4; *Treatise on Resurrection* 49.9–37; *Testimony of Truth* 34.26–37.9. See K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 189–91.

43. See B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, pp. 193–95.

44. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4.

45. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 7 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library).

46. Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 5.

47. *Gospel of Truth* 22.13–15.

48. *Gospel of Phillip* 61.29–31.

49. B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 11, 63.

50. See J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (HarperCollins, 1990), pp. 222–43. For a comparative analysis of the two texts, see B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 211–18.

51. See the discussion in G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 169–74.

52. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.1.3; 39.3.5; cf. *Revelation of Adam*, 77.4–18, 82.19–83.4. See G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 178–80.

53. See Acts 8:8–13, which describes the conversion of Simon Magus, later identified by several of the church fathers as the "first gnostic" or "father of all heresies" (e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 6.4–15).

54. *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHL III 64.1–3; cf. *Trimorphic Protennoia* 64.1–4.

55. For example, B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 15–19; B. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, pp. 116–20.

56. K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 284–85; K. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Harvard UP, 2006), pp. 191–203.

57. For a detailed account of the dispute between Sethian gnostics and the Neo-Platonist philosophers, see D. Burns, *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (Univ. Penn. Press, 2014).

58. Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.6.

59. Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 16.

60. See B. Pearson *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity*, pp. 29–79.

61. *Secret Book of John* NHL II 9.15; *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHL III 54.9–11, 59.13–60.10; *Revelation of Adam* 66.4, 83.4, 85.27–29; *Three Steles of Seth* 118.10–15.

62. For a short but informative discussion, see B. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism*, pp. 124–25.

63. *On the Posterity and Exile of Cain* 42, 171, 173.

64. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 39.2.4–7.

65. K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, p. 277.

66. For a survey of first century Judaism, see L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 43–87.

67. For a clear and compelling analysis of the relationship between apocalypticism and Gnosticism, see W. Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement*, pp. 89–110. See also the discussion in G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 237–48; K. Rudolf, *Gnosis*, pp. 277–80.

68. A *pesher* from Qumran, the *Habakkuk Commentary* (1QpHab), refers to the future destruction of a "Wicked Priest," apparently an allusion to the Hasmonean high priest in Jerusalem.

69. *Paraphrase of Shem* 1.4.

70. In contrast to its English equivalent, the Greek term does not necessarily imply an eschatological vision. An *apokalypsis* was a species of revelatory literature through which divine secrets were conveyed to the community. Such disclosures might include a vision of the end, but this was by no means a necessary ingredient. Some *apokalypsis* were oriented primarily toward revealing the structure of the cosmos or the inner workings of divine government. Most gnostic *apokalypsis* fall in this category, though some do incorporate an end time scenario.

71. The following historical reconstruction builds on David Hanson's seminal work, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*. For a recent variation of Hanson's thesis, see Steven Tuell, "The Priesthood of the 'Foreigner'" in *Constituting the Community*, ed. John Strong and Steven Tuell (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 183–204.

72. Ezek 44:15–31; this appears to be a Zadokite addition to Ezekiel's vision of the restoration, which the Zadokites apparently adopted and made their own.

73. Ezek 46:3.

74. Ezek 44:10–17; Num 18:1–7.

75. Ezek 44:19; 46:20; cf. Isa 65:5.

76. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, p. 226.

77. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 274–75.

78. See Zech 6:11–13, where the title of "Branch," formerly reserved for the Davidic king, has been transferred to the high priest.

79. See Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Hope and Disappointment: The Judahite Critique of the Exilic Leadership in Isaiah 56–66" in *New Perspectives on Old Testament Prophecy and History*, ed. R. Thelle, T. Stordalen, and M. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 57–73

80. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 181–82.

81. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 130–31.

82. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 26–27, 251.

83. See D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 209–47; D. Arthur, *A Smooth Stone*, pp. 289–97; idem, "Conflict and Convergence in the Book of Ezekiel" (forthcoming).

84. See D. Arthur, *A Smooth Stone*, pp. 155–285; idem, "Ezekiel's Radical Iconoclasm" (forthcoming).

85. See D. Arthur, *A Smooth Stone*, pp. 309–85; D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 32–208.

86. *The Secret Book of John*, NHL II 13.19–21; 22.22–24; 23.1–4; 29.6–7

87. *The Second Discourse of Great Seth* 62.27–65.2

88. D. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, p. 91; D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 106–8, 143–50, 404.

89. Isa 65:16. A similar divine title appears in several gnostic texts: e.g., *The Revelation of Adam* 65.11; *The Testimony of Truth* 41.5, 45.3; *Secret Book of John* NHL II 30.4. For connections between the language and ideology of the Isaiah tradition and later Gnosticism, see G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 206–11.

90. *Second Discourse of the Great Seth* 53.27f; 64.17ff; *The Secret Book of John*, NHL II 11.19–21, 13.8–13; *The Nature of the Rulers* 86.27–31; *Trimorphic Protennoia* 43.31–44.10; *Gospel of the Egyptians* NHL III 58.23–59.1; *Wisdom of Jesus* BG 125.10–126.5; *Paraphrase of Shem* 2.15–35.

91. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All* Heresies 6.31; see also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.4 (in reference to Ptolemy, who was a student of Valentinus).

92. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.29.4.

93. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.6.

94. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.6–12; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.25.3; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.2.

95. *On the Origin of the World*, 100.29–33, 101.3–13.

96. *On the Origin of the World*, 103.2–32.

97. For three well known and understood examples of Ezekiel's *məšālîm*, see Daniel Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 453–58, 522–48, 595–610. For an analysis of several previously unrecognized allegories, see D. Arthur, "Satire and Subversion in the Oracles of Ezekiel" *VT* 74 (2024): 486–510; idem, "Ezekiel's Koan: A Parablemonger Propounds an Iconoclastic Riddle" (forthcoming).

98. See D. Arthur, "Of Dragons, Trees, and Cattle: Ironic Sub-Texts in Ezekiel's Oracles against Egypt" (forthcoming).

99. The didactic tales in Daniel predate their reuse and reinterpretation in apocalyptic tradition. Compare Dan 3:1–23 to Ezra 1:2–6; 6:3–5, 11–12; 3:10–11; 7:11–26; cf. 2 Chr5:1–7, 12–13; 1 Chr 15:16–28. This understated satire is an echo of the struggle between the priestly elite and the "people of the land" (Ezra 4:1–5).

100. The most plausible hypothesis is that the core gnostic myth was transmitted via the Samaritans, descendants of the "people of the land," and traditional rivals of the Jews. According to Irenaeus, Gnosticism originated with a Samaritan, Simon Magus (*Against Heresies* 1.27). Justin Martyr—himself a native Samaritan—similarly points in that direction (*First Apology* 26). Though it is highly unlikely that the tradition began with Simon, other evidence lends indirect support to a Samaritan origin. The preface to the gnostic text *The Three Steles of Seth* speaks of a certain Dositheos as the revealer of the words of Seth. The name Dositheos and a sect of Dositheans are mentioned in several ancient and medieval sources. According to Samaritan tradition, the Dositheans were a baptizing sect that traced its lineage back to Seth (*Asatir* 2.3).

101. See D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, pp. 280–86.; D. Arthur, "Conflict and Convergence in the Book of Ezekiel" (forthcoming).

Chapter Four

The Literary and Historical Background

MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE

Among scholars, Revelation is almost universally understood as a form of crisis literature, written in the face of some overwhelming threat to the continued existence of the early church.[1] Exegetes portray the nature and scope of that crisis somewhat differently, depending on how the historical context is reconstructed, but the underlying assumption of existential peril is for the most part a constant.

One line of reasoning, dating back to the church fathers, asserts that the crisis was attributable to severe persecution by the Roman authorities. Some Christians have been killed (2:13; 6:9); others, including John himself, have been exiled (1:9). Given those circumstances, Revelation is seen as an appeal to remain steadfast in the face of continuing affliction and possible death.[2]

A second line of interpretation, more prevalent today, thinks of Revelation as a reaction to the ideology of the imperial cult, or more generally, as an emphatic rejection of any accommodation to Greco-Roman religious practices.[3] According to this line of reasoning, the authority of the deified emperor stands in direct conflict with loyalty to Jesus as the "King of kings and Lord of lords." Seen from that perspective, Revelation can be interpretted as an appeal to resist the corrupting influence of Rome.

Some scholars emphasize one hypothesis to the exclusion of the other; some combine elements of both. Either way, the interpretive framework remains fundamentally the same: Revelation is focused on the relation between the church and the Roman Empire, or more broadly, between the competing claims of religious allegiance and political authority. So prevalent is this view that one can speak of a strong scholarly consensus. While many details of the book remain contested, here at least we have the assured result of nearly two centuries of critical analysis.

This is a reasonable but nonetheless mistaken assumption. The evidence for interpreting Revelation as a reaction to Roman oppression is in fact scant. Were John's audience experiencing an external threat, we would expect his epistles to call for courage in the face of persecution or—if competition with imperial ideology was the main concern—to demand resistance to the dictates of Rome. But we find nothing of the kind. Instead John's letters are concerned almost exclusively with issues internal to the church. Only two of the seven letters (to Smyrna and Pergamum) mention "affliction" and in neither case is the suffering blamed on the Romans.[4] The only explicit conflict is between Jews and Christians (2:9; 3:9) and between factions within the church itself (2:2, 14–15, 20–23). Rome has no visible role in these controversies and seems to have been only indirectly involved in subsequent reprisals. A careful reading of the epistles indicates that whatever persecution may have occurred was sporadic and locally initiated, not a sustained state-sponsored campaign against the churches of Asia.[5]

The rationale for interpreting Revelation as a response to a real or perceived threat from Rome is based almost entirely on the following passage:

> I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.' . . .This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come; and when he does come, he must remain for a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but belongs to the seven . . . The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.' (17:3–5, 9–11, 15, 18)

Here an angel shows John a "mystery"—namely a woman "seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have fornicated" (17:2). The text oozes scriptural symbolism. The beast on which the woman sits is based on God's ancient foe, Leviathan the sea monster, fleshed out with details drawn from the book of Daniel (Ps 74:13–14; Job 41; Dan 7:2–7). The description of the woman herself is mostly derived from the prophecies of Ezekiel (16:10–19) and Jeremiah (4:30).

John's vision contains numerous clues to the identity of "Babylon," all of which seem to point to Rome. Let's begin with the most obvious: "The woman whom you saw is the great city, which rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). If one considers only the political situation of that time, there

can really be no question as to which city is meant. Rome was then near its apex, the absolute master of the Mediterranean world, with dominion over dozens of vassal kings and tributary states. Accordingly, scholars have almost unanimously understood "Babylon" as a transparent allusion to Rome.

This is certainly the obvious solution to John's "mystery"; it is not, however, the kind of subtle insight that would require a "mind with wisdom." If the question of meaning is confined to the immediate literary context, then a starkly different answer emerges. The prophet expressly tells us that Jerusalem is the exalted seat of the "Ruler of the kings of earth," with dominion over "every tribe and language and people and nation" (22:1–3; 1:5; 11:15; 5:9–10). To her all the "kings of the earth will bring their glory" (21:24).

Jerusalem's apotheosis is, of course, presented as a future condition, as yet unrealized. The glorified city will not descend from the skies until after the great tribulation. It is important to note, however, that this event is portrayed as a marriage, not as a birth (21:2). The celestial Jerusalem does not need to be created because it already exists, complete with throne room (4:2–11) and temple (11:19; 14:17; 15:8)—a notion well attested in Jewish literature contemporary to John.[6] That early Christians were also familiar with this concept is clear from allusions to the "Jerusalem that is above" (Gal 4:26) and the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22). Though its operations are concealed from mortal eyes, the city of God has always ruled over the kings of the world, in the past and present as well as in the future (Pss 2:1–12; 48:1–8; Matt 5:35). The only difference between now and the eschaton is that the celestial city will then be established on earth, so that its power and glory is manifest to one and all (21:2–3; cf. Zech 14:1–11).

THE "MYSTERY" UNVEILED

That it is in fact Jerusalem and not Rome that John has in view becomes apparent when the details of his metaphor are examined closely: "the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations" (17:4; cf. 18:12; Ezek 16:10–15). These attributes are all associated with New Jerusalem and its inhabitants: e.g., the ruler of the city wears a scarlet "robe stained with blood" (19:13; cf. Isa 63:2–3); the vassal kings streaming through its gates are garbed in royal purple (21:24; cf. 18:9; Dan 5:7); the city's buildings and streets are made of "pure gold" (21:18, 21); its foundations are "adorned with every kind of precious stone" (21:19); its twelve gates are each made of a single pearl (21:21). As demonstrated in a later discussion, the "golden cup filled with abominations" specifically alludes to the golden "cup of the wine of his fierce wrath," which is to be "poured out" from the heavenly temple (16:19; cf. 15:7–8; 14:8).

John refers elsewhere to the "great city" within a context that leaves little doubt as to its true identity. Shortly before the reign of evil is inaugurated, two witnesses are to appear, testify, and be killed (11:3–12). Their dead bodies are to lie unburied in "the street of the great city which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified" (11:8; cf. Luke 13:33). Because the "great city" motif connects this passage with John's portrait of "Babylon," some scholars have tried to find some sort of roundabout allusion here to Rome, but the mental gymnastics required to reach any such conclusion are extreme.[7] The identity of the "great city" is clear from explicit mention of the "holy city" (11:2; cf. 21:2), by its location "where also their Lord was crucified," and by its population of 70,000 (11:13), which roughly matches that of historical Jerusalem, but not that of Rome.[8] Several Jewish texts attest that the epithet "great city" could be applied to Jerusalem within a polemical context (e.g., Jer 22:8; *Sib. Or.* 5.154, 226, 413). The prophet's meaning is straightforward: just as Jesus was executed in Jerusalem, so too the witnesses must be slain there, for that city is the locus of all things evil, the moral equivalent of Sodom—the epitome of depravity—and of Egypt, the first oppressor of Israel.

That a Jew would characterize the holy city as "figuratively" analogous to Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon may seem implausible, for this was certainly not the prevailing view of the time. Most Jews thought of Jerusalem with profound nostalgia. For them, the city was paradise lost, the object of continuous longing.

Not everyone shared in that wistfulness, however. Certain groups on the religious periphery saw the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE as divine retribution, richly deserved. As we shall see, John belonged to one such group. In his eyes, Jerusalem was the source of everything foul and detestable, a cesspool of infinite depth and turbidity.

This was a perspective with ample biblical precedent. Several of the classical prophets had denounced the moral corruption of Jerusalem, in many cases invoking the very same metaphors John deploys in Revelation. For example, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all likened Jerusalem to Sodom or Gomorrah (Isa 1:10; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:46–49); all three also explicitly characterized the holy city as a "whore" (Isa 1:21; Jer 13:27; Ezek 16:25–33). John, who considered himself a successor to the classical prophets, has simply extended the scope of his predecessors' denunciations to include all versions of Jerusalem: old, new, earthly, and heavenly.

But before we can reach that conclusion, other clues to the identity of the "great city" must be considered. Of particular interest is the statement that "Babylon" is seated on seven mountains (17:9). Clearly this cannot be a reference to the historical Babylon, which was situated on an alluvial plain. Here the accepted interpretation of the "great city" as Rome would seem to be on firm ground, for the story of Rome's founding on seven hills is recounted in a number of classical Latin sources and was widely known throughout the Mediterranean world.[9]

Nonetheless, this interpretation is not without difficulties. First of all, the Roman hills hardly qualify as mountains, even allowing for prophetic hyperbole. While it is true that some ancient texts use the word *orē* to signify "hills," John consistently uses the term to refer to "mountains."[10] Second, there is no agreement as to which emperors are represented by the "seven kings." All attempts to define a historical sequence have relied on an artificial selection that omits some emperors in order to attain the required total of eight (seven plus the beast). Last and most important, John consistently draws his apocalyptic imagery from Jewish sources. Why would he now take up a foreign tradition instead?

The seven mountains are not based on Roman legend but on *1 Enoch*, a Jewish apocalypse that recounts the patriarch's journey through otherworldly realms:

> I saw at the end of the earth the firmament of the heaven above. As I proceeded, I saw a place which burns day and night, where there are seven mountains of magnificent stones, three towards the east, and three towards the south. As for those towards the east, one was of colored stone, and one of pearl, and one of jacinth, and those towards the south of red stone. But the middle one was made of alabaster reaching to heaven like the throne of God, and the summit of the throne was of sapphire. (*1 En* 18:6–10)

This text has numerous affinities with John's depiction of New Jerusalem. To begin with, the arrangement of mountains in groups of three facing east and south is reminiscent of the gates of the holy city, which also are arranged in groups of three, each facing one of the cardinal directions (21:13). Just as the six mountains are made of pearl, jacinth, and other precious stones, so too the walls of Jerusalem have gates of pearl and foundations "adorned with every jewel," including jacinth and sapphire (21:18–21). Significantly, the seventh mountain in Enoch's vision is made of white alabaster and reaches to heaven "like the throne of God," providing a clear parallel to the "great white throne and the One sitting upon it" in John's vision of final judgment (20:11; cf. *1 En* 25:3–4).

Not only do the seven mountains in Enoch's vision have the same layout and material composition as the walls of New Jerusalem, but these also encompass one of the holy city's greatest wonders. According to *1 Enoch*, the mythical tree of life is located amid those very same mountains:

> The seventh mountain was in the center [of the other six], and it excelled them in height, resembling the seat of a throne. Fragrant trees encircled the throne, and among them was a tree such as I had never smelled before, neither there nor elsewhere: it had a fragrance beyond all fragrance, and its leaves and blooms and wood never wither . . . Its fruit shall be food for the elect; it shall be transplanted in the holy place, the temple of the Lord, the Eternal King. Then they shall rejoice and be glad, and enter into the holy place. Its fragrance shall be in their bones, and they shall live a long life on earth. (24:3–4; 25:5–6)

Cult tradition had long associated the Jerusalem temple with the tree of life.[11] Enoch here sees that miraculous sapling restored to its rightful place in the holy precincts. Not coincidentally, John also situates his grove of life-giving trees at the very center of New Jerusalem, next to the "throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1–2, 14).

THE SEVEN RULERS

The book of *1 Enoch* has thus provided the scriptural prototype for the seven mountains on which the "great city" is seated. But what of the seven kings? Because that sequence of rulers is widely seen as a clue to the date of composition, this particular detail has long been the subject of intensive debate.[12] According to the prevailing reasoning, John wrote during the reign of the sixth king who "now is" in anticipation of an approaching eschatological consummation after the rise of the seventh who "has not yet come" (17:10).

But here too John is dependent on Jewish tradition rather than on contemporary political circumstances. The seven kings are drawn from the same source as the seven mountains. Enoch continues his otherworldly tour as follows:

> I saw a place which had no firmament in the heaven above, and no firmly founded earth beneath it; there was no water upon it, and no birds, but it was a waste and horrible place. I saw there seven stars like great blazing mountains, and when I inquired regarding them, the angel said to me: "This place is the end of heaven and earth: it has become a prison for the stars and the host of heaven. The stars that roll over the fire are they who have transgressed the commandment of the Lord." (*1 En* 18:12–15; cf. 21:1–10; 67:4–7)

The "seven stars like great blazing mountains" mentioned here are distinct from the "seven mountains of magnificent stones" that Enoch saw previously. John has, however, conflated the two scenes into a single image, just as he took the four beasts in Daniel's vision and merged them into a single compound monster. Consequently, he can invoke one symbol—the "seven heads" of the beast—to refer interchangeably to the seven mountains on which the "great city" is seated or to a related succession of seven kings.

To understand the connection here, we must delve into the cultural background of Enoch's vision. In the astronomical systems of the Greco-Roman world, the earth stood at the center of the cosmos, enclosed by seven concentric spheres, one for each of the seven visible planets.[13] Beyond these seven circles lay the eighth heaven of the fixed stars. Together these eight spheres defined the scope of the universe, as then conceived.

This cosmology was closely associated with the idea of fate. Each of the planetary spheres controlled some aspect of human destiny. The movements

of the planets through the heavens drove the outcome of events, with consequences that were often harmful and sometimes disastrous, as personal experience showed all too well. When translated into religious terms, these astrological ideas implied the existence of indifferent—and sometimes malevolent—deities who ruled over fate with little or no concern for the human cost.

In the Jewish version of this prevalent belief, the astrological deities became fallen angels who had mutinied against the decree of God, a notion perhaps based on the observation that the planets do not conform to the fixed order of the other stars, but instead wander independently about the heavens.[14] The moral corruption of these heavenly beings was traced back to an episode related in the book of Genesis, where the "sons of god" took to wife the "daughters of men," (Gen 6:1–4; *1 En* 7:2), thereby defiling themselves and unveiling heavenly secrets (*1 En* 9:6–7; Jude 6). The wasteland Enoch beholds in the passage quoted above is a sort of celestial prison, where the rebellious members of the heavenly host are held in captivity.[15]

These prevalent astrological concepts were taken up by gnostic tradents and elaborated further. In Sethian mythology, the seven planetary gods have become seven archons or "rulers," each governing a compartment of the lower heavens.[16] Together the seven reigned over the *heimarmemē*, the dominion of fate, which held humanity in thrall to the powers of darkness and futility.

Though reigning supreme over the world of humanity, the seven archons were themselves subject to the creator-god Yaldabaoth, who bears the title "Chief Archon."[17] Because the demiurge was the progenitor of the planetary archons, he was both distinct from and related to the other seven, and was therefore sometimes thought of as an eighth archon,[18] closely paralleling John's description of the seven-headed beast as "an eighth but belonging to the seven."

Taken by itself, this correspondence could be dismissed as coincidental. But the parallel goes beyond the numerical to include the substantive. In gnostic manuscripts and icons, Yaldabaoth is commonly depicted as a huge lion-headed snake—yet another variant of the primordial chaos-monster.[19] In one instance, the demiurge is explicitly described as a "frightful beast with multiple faces."[20] This portrait is strongly reminiscent of the horrifying monster—also a "beast" with the mouth of a lion and multiple heads—that John sees emerging from the abyss (13:1–2).

At this point in the discussion, the relation between John's vision and Sethian mythology must be regarded as unproven and unexplained. Nonetheless, there are good reasons, which we shall consider later, to think that this or a closely related set of concepts stands in the near background of the image of a seven-headed beast. This is just one of several instances where the prophet has inserted a gnostic motif into a complex symbolism of mixed but predominantly Jewish origin.

What we can say with confidence is that John was familiar with Enoch's vision and referenced it extensively in his own portrayal of the end time. Consider, for example, the following episode:

> The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a great mountain blazing with fire was thrown down into the sea. (Rev 8:8)

This metaphor clearly draws on the "seven stars like great blazing mountains" depicted in *1 Enoch*. In each instance, the image of a fiery mountain is associated with a rebellious angel forcibly expelled from the celestial realm (12:7–9; cf. *1 En* 88:1). In John's vision, that being is none other than Satan himself (12:9, 12b).

The motif of a demonic "mountain blazing with fire" also appears in the gnostic treatise *On the Origin of the World*:

> Before the end of the age, the whole region will shake with loud thunder. The archons will lament . . . their kings will be intoxicated with the fiery sword, and they will wage war against one another, so that the earth will be drunk from the blood that is poured out. . . . Then the sun will darken, and the moon will lose its light. The stars of the sky will abandon their circuits and a great thunder will come from a great power above . . . The gods of chaos . . . will be cast down into the abyss. They will be obliterated because of their wickedness. They will become like mountains blazing with fire and they will consume one another until they are destroyed by their arch-creator. When he has destroyed them, he will turn against himself and attack himself until he is no more. (125.32–126.35)

John and the gnostic author of *On the Origin of the World* have plainly drawn their end-time scenarios from the same eschatological playbook. Not only does the "burning mountains" motif appear in both, but in each case, the apocalyptic schedule includes rulers lamenting (cf. Rev 18:9); mass intoxication (cf. Rev 17:2); a climactic battle and massacre (cf. Rev 19:19–21); darkening of the sun and moon (cf. Rev 6:12); stars falling out of the sky (cf. Rev 6:13); thunder coming from a great power above (cf. Rev 10:1–4); and demons cast into the "abyss" (cf. Rev 20:10). Some of these motifs are more or less standard eschatological elements, also recurrent in Jewish and Christian apocalypses. What makes this line of eschatological tradition distinctively different is its denouement.[21] Here—as also in Revelation—it is not the armies of heaven that defeat the forces of evil; instead evil attacks and destroys itself.[22]

For our present purposes, the endpoint of John's prophecy is of less importance than its presuppositions. We have seen that the key paradigms underlying the book of Revelation have been drawn from prophetic and mythological sources rather than from historical events. Far from being obsessed

with the contemporary political scene, John has no real interest in Rome at all. For him, the Roman Empire is no more than a puppet state, the surface manifestation of a far greater and more insidious dominion. His focus lies elsewhere, in a pitched battle then raging in the heavens.

THE IMMEDIATE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In one regard, the standard scholarly interpretation of Revelation is undoubtedly correct: the celestial war between God and Satan is a proxy for earthly struggles then taking place locally in Asia Minor. The nature of this conflict was, however, religious rather than political. The enemy is not the imperial government but a faction within the church itself. The severity of John's reaction is due to the very closeness of his foes, who claim to serve the same God as he, yet understand the nature and scope of divinity in an incompatible and contrary way.

The historical situation addressed by John is explicit in the seven epistles that follow his inaugural vision (2:2–3:22).[23] There the social and religious context of Revelation is openly referenced, with little attempt at concealment or riddle-making. The locale, main participants, and key events are all named and directly, if briefly, described. Though obscure to us today due to our remove in time, the circumstances presupposed in John's epistles would have been known to his intended audience.

Taken collectively, what the letters portray is a church in disarray, beset by outside foes and racked by bitter disputes within. Christians in Smyrna and Pergamum are suffering "affliction" from their enemies; some have been killed (2:10, 13; cf. 6:9–11). Elsewhere, prophets and itinerant missionaries have spread false doctrine, leading many astray (2:2, 20). One faction within the church is actively promoting libertine permissiveness (2:14, 20). An opposing faction has countered with harsh polarizing polemic, characterizing their adversaries as acolytes of Satan (2:24; 3:9). Confused and dismayed by the ongoing turmoil, some Christians have lost their initial zeal (2:4; 3:1–2). Others have become complacent, their spiritual hunger dulled by the accumulation of wealth (3:15–17). In some churches, only a small minority has remained faithful (3:4, 8).

Responsibility for this dire situation is assigned to two groups. The first consists of Jews from the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). There is, of course, absolutely no reason to think that the Jews in question were involved in satanic rituals. Their specific crimes are instigating the persecution of Christians in Smyrna and attempting to force Jesus' followers in Philadelphia to renounce their allegiance to Christ. Evidently the Jewish population in these two cities took steps to excise what they perceived to be a cancer growing on their ancestral faith. Since Jews in Asia Minor had no political power, whatever action they may have taken will have involved collusion

with the civil authorities. From other sources, we hear that the Jewish population of Smyrna actively participated in the public execution of the bishop Polycarp in 155 CE,[24] so a similar scenario in John's time is by no means implausible.

The second source of discord is a group called the Nicolaitans. Other than its locus in Asia Minor, little is known about this group, as we have no reliable independent record to counterbalance John's vehement denunciations. Presumably the group derived its name from a teacher or founder called Nicolas. Some of the church fathers traced the sect back to a deacon of Antioch who bore that name (Acts 6:5), but that attribution is probably conjectural.[25]

The Nicolaitans appear to have been a schismatic Christian group led by prophets, whom John has labeled with the pejorative code-names "Jezebel" and "Balaam."[26] Evidently these two prophets had successfully proselytized in the region, attracting a sizable following in Pergamum and Thyatira. Because John equates the "the teaching of Balaam" with the "teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:14–15), and the substance of this teaching is identical to that of Jezebel, as described in the letter to Thyatira (2:20), we are most likely dealing with local manifestations of the same group. Probably the false apostles spurned by the Ephesians also belong under this banner, since that rejection is taken as evidence of the city's hatred of "the works of the Nicolaitans" (2:2, 6).

The various charges leveled against the Nicolaitans provide clues to their identity and self-understanding. Particularly noteworthy is the assertion that Jezebel's followers claim to possess "the deep secrets of Satan" (2:24). This is, of course, a polemical statement and certainly not what the Nicolaitans themselves thought they knew. The same ironical twist in meaning is apparent in John's invective against his Jewish opponents (2:9; 3:9). Just as certain Jews claimed to constitute the "synagogue of God" but from John's perspective were really a "synagogue of Satan," so too the Nicolaitans claimed to know "the deep secrets of God" but actually knew the reverse, namely demonic delusions.

The idea of esoteric knowledge or "deep secrets" is recurrent in gnostic writings. The church father Irenaeus mentions a gnostic group that claimed to know "the deep things of God."[27] A similar assertion probably stands in the background of John's polemic.[28] Though any conclusion based on this one statement is tenuous, there are good reasons—which we shall discuss in due course—to think that the Nicolaitans were an offshoot from the gnostic stem. While it is not likely that we are dealing here with the more highly developed gnostic systems familiar to Irenaeus, the world view of the Nicolaitans recognizably exhibits the same ideological pattern.

The main point of contention between John and the Nicolaitans was their permissive attitude to idolatry. Both Balaam and Jezebel taught that it was acceptable to eat meat that had been consecrated to pagan deities (2:14, 20).

The basis of this teaching was gnostic freedom. As spiritual persons, gnostics were not constrained by social or religious conventions. Having entered into a state of grace, their external actions were of little consequence. One could partake in pagan feasts or not—it made no difference. The liberated soul remained unscathed either way.

This teaching was motivated by practical as well as spiritual concerns. "Food sacrificed to idols" would have included not only meat consumed in an explicitly religious setting, but also meat from animals ritually slaughtered then sold in the public markets. Since the common person rarely ate meat except on sacramental occasions, a strict ban against eating any form of sacrificial offering would in practice be tantamount to vegetarianism. More importantly, refusal to eat consecrated meat had important social implications. Much of ancient life revolved around ceremonial meals; to disallow participation in these would inevitably entail social distancing.[29]

Nonetheless, for the faction represented by John, any accommodation with pagan practices is not merely misguided but categorically evil. As an indication of the severity of the crime, the prophet augments the charge of eating "food sacrificed to idols" with the additional infraction of "immortality" or "fornication" (*porneia*). Fornication, in this context, implies religious infidelity (i.e., worship of a foreign god) rather than illicit sexual activity. This is a stock allegation well attested in prophetic literature (e.g., Ezek 23:1–30) as well as in early Christian rhetoric (Acts 15:20, 29; Rom 1:23–25; Rev 17:2).

As a counterpoint, it is instructive to compare John's unconditional rejection of the "teaching of the Nicolaitans" with a closely parallel situation addressed by Paul in Corinth (1 Cor 8:1–13; 10:14–30). Confronted with the implied claim that "eating food offered to idols" was permissible, Paul acknowledges that "we know that an idol has no real existence" and therefore one may "eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience." Agreeing with his interlocutors that as followers of Jesus "all of us possess knowledge" and accordingly that "all things are lawful," Paul adds that "not all things are helpful." While knowledge (*gnōsis*) provides valuable insights, love (*agapē*) constitutes a higher calling for followers of Jesus. What this means, in practice, is that even though eating meat consecrated to idols has no consequences for those who possess knowledge, one must take into consideration the possible effect of such an act on those whose understanding is not equally strong and who may thereby succumb to idolatry (1 Cor 8:7). In short, individual freedom is constrained by the bonds of community.

The correspondences between the two episodes are remarkable, given their separation in time and locale. In circumstances more than a half century apart, John and Paul both encountered a gnostic or gnosticizing group, each espousing similar teachings that had arisen in response to the very same question, namely: "Should a Christian eat meat sacrificed to idols?" Clearly

the issue of sacramental meals was a prevalent concern among the early churches, elicited by their context within an overwhelmingly pagan milieu.[30]

What distinguishes Paul from John is neither the initial question nor the final answer, but the tone and vehemence of the reply. Paul views his gnostic interlocutors not as enemies, but as potential converts to his point of view. Though he rebuts their teaching, he does so without rancor. Instead he seeks to engage his rivals in constructive debate, using dialectical methods of argument then current among Hellenized pedagogues. He grants the validity of his opponents' main premise—that knowledge brings freedom—while persuasively guiding them toward a contrary conclusion. From his perspective, the gnostic fallacy is more a question of faulty reasoning than of false doctrine.

By John's time, any such concession was inconceivable. The battle lines had been drawn; open debate and compromise were no longer an option. Those who advocate such ideas are the spawn of Satan, beyond any possibility of redemption. Nothing more than this can—or should—be said. The discussion is closed.

We encounter a similar perspective in a series of letters composed around 110 CE by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch. Like John, Ignatius wrote to several churches along the coast of the province of Asia. Three of these—Ephesus, Smyrna, and Philadelphia—were also addressees of John's letters.

The circumstances of the churches of Asia, as portrayed in Ignatius' letters, are remarkably similar to the situation of those same churches as depicted in John's epistles.[31] Once again, we hear of sporadic persecution—Ignatius himself was executed shortly thereafter—however, just as in John's letters, external oppression is only of peripheral concern. The main thrust of Ignatius' letters is directed instead toward internal sectarian disputes. False teachers have infiltrated several Christian communities, leading many astray. As in Revelation, the proto-orthodox leadership has responded to the threat with harsh invective, condemning their opponents as "evil weeds" growing in God's holy garden.[32]

Like John, Ignatius singles out two groups as the main sources of dissension.[33] The first of these is comprised of "Judaizers"—meaning those Christians who continue to observe the Law of Moses while professing allegiance to Christ. In Ignatius' view, commitment to the one precludes adherence to the other: "It is absurd to profess Christ Jesus, and to practice Judaism, for Christianity did not embrace Judaism, but Judaism embraced Christianity."[34] Not having committed fully to their adopted faith, these Judaizers are like "tombstones and graves of the dead"; their teaching is "old leaven," unable to quicken the church. Therefore "if any one preaches the Jewish Law to you, do not listen to him."[35]

The second group consists of certain individuals "who seem worthy of credit, but teach strange doctrines."[36] These doctrines include, specifically,

the claim that Jesus was a purely spiritual being and therefore "only seemed to suffer."[37] Corollary to this notion is the assertion that Christ was never born, never died, and therefore never rose from the dead.[38] Ignatius warns that those who advocate such fallacies "mix up Jesus Christ with their own poison . . . like those who administer a deadly drug in sweet wine, of which the ignorant greedily partake with fatal pleasure, leading to their own death."[39] The time is coming, however, when the heretics "shall be consigned to everlasting fire, and so shall every one that hearkens to them."[40] Therefore faithful Christians should flee these "evil offshoots, which produce death-bearing fruit, whereof if any one tastes, he instantly dies."[41] They are "ravening dogs, who bite secretly, against whom you must be on your guard."[42] Ignatius may or may not have the Nicolaitans specifically in view here, but clearly his invective targets a group with similar ideas, which have provoked a similarly drastic response from church officials.

Parallels between the two sets of letters go beyond generalities to include specifics. In his epistle to the Ephesians, Ignatius cites a recent event: "I have heard that certain persons passed through from outside, bringing false doctrine, but you did not allow them to sow seed among you, having stopped your ears."[43] This commendation is strongly reminiscent of John's praise for a similar act of repudiation: "you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false" (Rev 2:2; cf. Acts 20:29–30). These incidents are too alike to be distinct episodes. In both epistles, the Ephesians are lauded for rejecting itinerant missionaries who tried to introduce deviant ideas. The locale, main participants, and outcome are the same in each case. Clearly this was an event that made an impression on the church leadership, and was subsequently upheld as an emblem of proto-orthodox fidelity.

Though the polemical emphasis differs somewhat,[44] Ignatius and John contend with similar opponents located in the very same region. In the eyes of both men, observant Jews and non-conforming Christians are tearing apart the fabric of the churches in Asia, threatening their continued existence. Both write after the Ephesian repudiation had occurred but close enough in time for the memory to be fresh. All this suggests that John and Ignatius were near contemporaries. Ignatius' letters are dated somewhere between 105–115 CE; John's epistles appear to have been composed in direct response and therefore would be dated a little later, 110–125 CE.

Ignatius' letters provide only a sketchy and rather blurred portrait of the heretics and are for that reason of limited usefulness in understanding the social organization and religious stance of his opponents. What the epistles do provide, however, is an illuminating picture of the mindset of the proto-orthodox leadership.

A recurrent theme in Ignatius' writing, appearing in each of his six epistles to the churches in Asia, is the need for unquestioning obedience to

the bishop: "Take heed of the bishop, that God also may heed you"; "follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father"; "He who honors the bishop is honored by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop renders service to the devil."[45] Indeed, for the ordinary believer, the bishop stands as a visible manifestation of the deity himself, "presiding after the likeness of God."[46]

Ignatius was an early advocate of an organizational principle which scholars have labeled the "monarchical episcopate."[47] In practical terms, this was a form of centralized church governance in which all the house churches within a city or district were subject to the authority of a single "overseer" [*episkopos*]. Conceptually, the scheme presupposed a rigid, religiously based hierarchy in which power and information was segregated by level, flowing downward only through sanctioned channels. Atop this multi-layered structure was God enthroned; below him was Christ; next came the various orders of angelic beings, then the apostles, then the bishops, then the deacons and elders, followed by the male head of household, with women and slaves consigned to the bottom level.[48]

Ignatius takes pains to make the basis of this arrangement very clear: "let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, and also the bishop as a type of the Father, and the elders as the council of God and as the assembly of the apostles. Nothing can be called a church without these."[49] The hierarchy within the church and society mirrors a sacred order established in heaven, with each rank assigned a specific status and corresponding privileges.[50] Those inhabiting lower floors in the edifice are obligated to respect and obey those superior in elevation.

Another recurrent theme in Ignatius' letters is the central importance of unity. The church is to "have but one Eucharist [and] . . . one altar, as there is one bishop."[51] Christians are to "shun divisions, as the beginning of evils"; and "be joined together with an undivided heart"; "let there be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope, in love and in joy undefiled."[52]

This is, however, a unity that is itself predicated on divisiveness. What Ignatius envisioned was not an ecumenical alliance of all Christians, accomplished through an inclusive process of empathetic discussion and mutual understanding, but a purge eliminating all sources of dissension.

Foremost among those who are to be excluded are "certain persons who are godless," namely non-conforming Christians who hold alternative views regarding the nature of divinity.[53] True Christians should "stay aloof from such persons and not speak about them either in private or in public."[54] Those who advocate Jewish practices are also to be shunned.[55] The tent is no longer large enough to accommodate the like of these.

Though he probably did not coin the term, Ignatius is the first known writer to invoke the word "Christianity" as an ideological construct. The way that the bishop uses the word indicates that this is not a neutral descriptive label, intended simply to designate a new religion. As he understood it, "Christianity" is not one religion among many, but the only religion that matters: "for whosoever is called by any other name besides this is not of God."[56] This would apply specifically to Jews as well as pagans.

Originally, of course, Jesus' followers were all considered Jews, both among themselves and by the outside world. What Ignatius calls "Christianity" began as a Jewish sect that saw in Jesus the long awaited Messiah. To participate in that hope, even gentile converts necessarily became Jewish. A rigid distinction between "Jew" and "Christian" emerged only in Ignatius' time, largely as a means of asserting independence from the mother faith.

The endpoint of the spiritual trajectory charted by Ignatius is manifest in the Pastoral Epistles, also composed in Asia Minor, some twenty or thirty years after the bishop wrote. As evidenced by these three letters, the project of strengthening and consolidating the church order has advanced markedly. Instead of the "good news" of God's imminent dominion, the gospel is now conceived as a "deposit of truth" [*kalos parathēkē*] which has been entrusted to church officials for safekeeping (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14). This received tradition has been systemized and codified in a "sound teaching" (1 Tim 1:10, 15; 2 Tim 4:3). An authoritative scripture has also been defined.[57] Christianity itself has become simply "the faith," understood as a fixed doctrine, rather than—as proclaimed by earlier evangelists—personal commitment or trusting obedience.[58] Here the monarchical episcopate is no longer presented as a theoretical construct toward which the church is to strive; instead that social order is now an established reality.[59]

Written by an unknown church official in the name of the apostle Paul, the Pastoral Epistles define the boundaries of the moral universe inhabited by the church.[60] In general, his admonitions take the form of parenesis, a rhetorical vehicle widely used in the Greco-Roman world for ethical instruction.[61] Teachings of this kind were often presented in a format similar to what we find in the Pastoral Epistles: as lists of virtues and vices, as a collection of maxims, as letters expounding the basis of the ethical life, or as contrasting examples of illustrious virtue and notorious vice. In this way, a teacher would instill a set of precepts for the practical conduct of life, leading the pupil toward a state of virtue. In this particular case, the teaching is primarily concerned with church order and governance; supplementary guidance is also provided for individual piety, godly behavior, and the proper disposition of the patriarchal household. The explicit goal of the letters

is to "write these instructions to you so that . . . you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God" (1 Tim 3:15; cf. Eph 2:19).

A second objective, no less important than the first, is to establish the chain of authority on which the ecclesiastical hierarchy is based. Titus, who is portrayed as a prototype of the bishops of the writer's own time, is instructed by Paul to "appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" and "put in order what remains to be done," namely, exhorting the faithful to adhere to sound teaching and refuting opposing views (Titus 1:5–13; 2:1–15; 1 Tim 3:1–9). This commission serves to legitimize the monarchical episcopate, which now can point to a direct line of authority reaching back to the apostle Paul himself.

The historical circumstances implicit in these letters suggest that external threats to the church have temporarily subsided. No mention is made of persecution by Roman authorities. On the contrary, Christians are now asked to offer "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings . . . for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life" (1 Tim 2:1f; cf. 1 Pet 2:13–20). It would appear that an uneasy truce has been forged, wherein Christians are no longer required to directly acknowledge the divinity of their rulers, but are nonetheless expected to uphold the existing political order through intermediation with their God.

The battle with internal foes, on the other hand, rages on with unabated ferocity. Christians are directed to "avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge [*gnōsis*]."[62] The teachings of those "who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place" are like "gangrene" on the body of Christ (2 Tim 2:16–18). Also to be avoided are Judaizers who adhere to the "commandments of those who reject the truth." These Jewish Christians "profess to know God, but deny him by their actions." All such "idle talkers and deceivers . . . must be silenced" (Titus 1:10–16).[63]

As in Ignatius' letters, a rigid social and religious hierarchy is implicit throughout. Women are to "learn in silence with full submission"; under no circumstances are they "to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Tim 2:11–12). Slaves "are to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect" (Titus 2:9). Everyone else is "to be subject to rulers and authorities" and to the "sound teaching" of the bishops (Titus 3:1; 2:1).

Within this regimented system, every person has a delegated role and specified duties. Older men are to provide an example to others by being "temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance" (Titus 2:2). Similarly, older women are "to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to

be self-controlled, chaste" (Titus 2:3–5). Young widows are to "marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us." (1 Tim 5:14). Slaves are "not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:9–10).

The world order prescribed in the Pastoral Epistles is tidy, secure, and coherent, cleansed of doubt through unquestioning conformity. Yet this is also a rather trivial domain, characterized by shallow, paternalistic moralizing. The basic thrust of these letters is concisely summarized by the writer's admonition to "train yourself in godliness" (1 Tim 4:7). What matters above all else is proper decorum. Issues involving social justice or the equitable distribution of power are disregarded, having been consigned to the messy moral realm of the heretics.

The ethical limitations of this perspective become especially obvious in the implied suggestion that Christians who own other Christians as slaves need not release them; instead the moral onus falls entirely upon the slaves, who are not to disrupt the equanimity of their masters by being disrespectful (1 Tim 6:2; cf. 1 Pet 2:18–20). Though directed toward right behavior, the "sound teaching" promoted in the Pastoral Epistles represents a moral vision without depth, an ethic where principle is less important than outward respectability. Here the conventional mores and social norms of late antiquity are uncritically accepted as a divinely ordained regimen.

It was not always so. The Jesus movement began as a revolt against the established social order, exemplified by the hypocrisy of the "scribes and Pharisees" (Matt 23:13–36; Luke 6:2–10) and the callousness of the rich (Luke 6:24–26; Matt 19:16–24). Though unmistakably Jewish in outlook, many of Jesus' sayings are essentially a reversal of normative Jewish values: e.g., "the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (versus the fourth commandment); "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (versus the fifth commandment); "there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile" (versus the purity code); "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (versus the traditional role of a teacher of the Law); "the first shall be last and the last first" (versus the established social and religious hierarchy).[64] This message, revolutionary in its time and context, has now given way to an appeal for unwavering conformity. No longer are we asked to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" or to "let the dead bury the dead" (Matt 5:6; 8:22). Instead we are "to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show every courtesy to everyone" (Titus 3:1–2). In place of the strenuous demands of the end-time ethic espoused by the first generation

of Christians, we are now presented with a domesticated morality centered on church administration and family life. A movement that began as a revolt against the status quo has come full circle and is now itself part of the established order.

This is, of course, a normal and expected historical development, which inevitably occurs as a movement matures into an institution. As the original impetus of the founder's vision fades, the practical tasks of implementation create a pressing need for organization and structure. Lines of authority are established, a common set of rules is defined, a bureaucratic regime emerges. Though ironical, the shift in perspective evident in the Pastoral Epistles is unsurprising.

As the ecclesiastical hierarchy consolidated its hold, the three types of dissenters singled out in John's epistles—Jews, gnostics, and prophets—were pushed towards the margins of Christianity, away from the central decision-making apparatus of the church. Jewish Christians increasingly found themselves in a hostile environment where their ancestral traditions were dismissed as the "commandments of those who reject the truth" or "quarrels over the Law" (Titus 1:14; 3:9). Gnostics, though still thinking of themselves as followers of Christ, were effectively disbarred from participation in community life (2 John 7–11). Even prophets, once acknowledged as leaders within the church, now found their influence rapidly ebbing. By its very nature, prophetic inspiration was extemporaneous and unrestrained—and uncertainty in any form was no longer welcome.

In the polemical tracts of the early church, Jews, gnostics, and prophets form what might be called an unholy trinity of heterodoxy. Again and again we hear warnings and denunciations aimed at one or more of these three social categories. In the gospel of John, for example, we are told that "the Jews" are the progeny "of your father the devil," and therefore collectively responsible for Jesus' murder.[65] In the gospel of Matthew, we are admonished to "beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."[66] Concerning the gnostics, Ignatius' disciple Polycarp wrote: "whoever perverts the sayings of the Lord by saying there is neither resurrection nor judgment—such a one is a firstborn of Satan."[67] Because these groups were not successfully assimilated into the church, they were often delegated an adversarial role within the official narrative and evolving ideology of early Christianity.

Some heretics seem to have had a singular identity as a Jew, a gnostic, or a prophet; in many instances, however, these social identities overlapped or merged, as in the case of the Nicolaitans and the prophets Balaam and Jezebel. Many gnostics were Jewish; some gnostic groups included prophets. A few heretics appear to have identified with all three social categories.

Because of their vulnerability and isolation, an alliance based on opposition would have been a natural recourse, but this can be no more than a partial explanation of the frequent association of the three types of dissenters. Jewish Christians, Christian prophets, and gnostic Christians emerged from intertwined sociological contexts, with an affinity born of parallel ideologies, historical confluence, and social ostracism.

John—himself a prophet, a Jew, and a covert gnostic—is by no means an exception to the preceding observations. Though ostensibly allied with the forces of orthodoxy, his true allegiances lie elsewhere. He comes from the fringes of Christianity, out of the shadow world beyond the light of the emerging ecclesiastical order. There, amid the slums surrounding the city of God, dwell those whom he loves and serves. Like the classical prophets before him, John has taken up the cause of the dispossessed—those who thought they belonged to the kingdom of God, only to find themselves disbarred, spurned as heretics. It is on their behalf that he prophesies, in a voice resonant with sarcasm and fury.

The book John left behind is the literary equivalent of a Trojan horse: the enigmatic gift of a vanquished foe, perceived as a trophy by the victors, and subsequently hauled through the gates of the heavenly citadel by the saints themselves. But just as in the case of ancient Troy, the prize bears within itself the hidden agent of future destruction.

Revelation was accepted into the canon because it appears to say what church officials wanted to hear: namely, that they are the chosen of God and all who oppose them are destined for the fires of hell. The underlying intent of John's words, however, moves in the opposite direction from their surface meaning. In embracing the prophet as their spokesman, the ecclesiastical hierarchy unwittingly brought an implacable enemy into its very midst.

John is an unrecognized lion set loose in a flock of sheep: he will eat them all.

NOTES

1. For example, A.Y. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, pp. 84–104; D. L. Barr "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World," *Interpretation* 38 (1984), pp. 39–50.

2. For example, I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of* John, pp. 208–16; M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John*, pp. xli-xliii.

3. For example, H. J. De Jonge "The Apocalypse of John and the Imperial Cult," *Kykeon*, pp. 127–41; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 28–33.

4. Roman officials may well have been the particular agent of "affliction," but John does not hold them responsible. Instead he blames Jews from the "synagogue of Satan" for denouncing Christians to the civil authorities in Smyrna (2:9–10). How Antipas was killed—whether by mob lynching or by judicial decree—is not said (2:13), but here too, the polemical thrust of the letter to Pergamum is aimed at those "who hold the teachings of the Nicolaitans" rather than the Roman imperium (2:14–16).

5. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 95–174; C. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 578. For a review of current scholarship on this topic, see P. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast*, pp. 3–14.

6. *4 Ezra* 7:26; 10:26–27; 13:36; *2 Baruch* 4:2–6; *Wis*. 9:8; Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.180–81.

7. S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, p. 281; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Harper & Row, 1966), p. 138; C. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 506; R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 220–21.

8. C. L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 61.

9. Juvenal *Satires* 9.130; Ovid *Tristia* 1.5.69; Pliny *Naturalis Historia* 3.66–67.

10. G. K. Beale, *Revelation*, p. 868. See Rev 6:15–16; 16:20.

11. Ezek 47:12; Isa 51:3; Jer 31:12; 1 Kgs 6:29; Ps 36:8–9.

12. G. Osborne, *Revelation*, pp. 617–20.

13. The ancients included the sun and moon under this category, along with Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

14. This idea is indirectly implied in Jude 13b.

15. For a comprehensive analysis of this theme, see L. T. Stuckenbruck, *The Myth of Rebellious Angels: Studies in Second Temple Judaism and New Testament Texts*.

16. *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 11.4–7. See K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 67–69, 106; H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 43.

17. *The Nature of the Rulers* 90.19–20; *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 10.19; *On the Origin of the World* 103.15–16.

18. This idea is implicit in the *Secret Book of John*, where Yaldabaoth is called the "Chief Archon" but not included in the list of seven planetary archons (NHL II 11.4–12.33). See also *On the Origin of the World* 104.31–105.12; Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies* 7.11.7; 7.13.3; Epiphanius, *Panarion* 40.2.6; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.30.4.

19. See the *Secret Book of* John, NHL II 10.7–9. This description is reminiscent of the chimera, a hybrid beast also said to have the head of a lion and a snakelike tail (Homer, *Iliad* 6.181–82; Ovid *Tristia* 4.7.13).

20. *The Paraphrase of Shem* 15.13–16; cf. *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 11.35–12.4; *The Nature of the Rulers* 94.16–17.

21. See the discussion in G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 241–47.

22. See Rev 17:16. From John's perspective, the heavenly army pictured in 19:11–16 belongs to the forces of evil.

23. For a detailed analysis, see P. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast*, pp. 31–47.

24. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2; 13.2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15, 26, 29.

25. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.36; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.3.

26. A close analogy to the Nicolaitans is mentioned in the epistles of John the elder, a near contemporary of the prophet John. An unnamed faction censured there had split off from the established church and formed a rival movement (1 John 2:19), based on the charismatic leadership of a school of prophets, who boasted of their knowledge of God (1 John 2:4). Among other heresies, these prophets denied that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," leading the church elder to denounce them as inspired by "the spirit of antichrist" (1 John 4:1–3). It is clear, nonetheless, that their teaching was widely accepted, for he also concedes that "the world listens to them."

27. *Against Heresies* 2.22.3; 2.28.9; cf. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 5.6.4. The apostle Paul made a similar claim, probably based on his familiarity with gnostic teachings (1 Cor 2:10).

28. For a useful discussion regarding the possible target of John's vitriol, see E.S. Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, pp. 114–20; see also B. Newman, "The Fallacy of the Domitian Hypothesis: Critique of the Irenaeus Source as a Witness for the Contemporary-Historical Approach," *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963), pp. 133–39.

29. See the excursus in C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 99–101.

30. This issue was also debated in the primitive church in Jerusalem and resolved via a formal decree (Acts 15:19–30).

31. W. Baur, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, pp. 77–80.

32. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 3.1.

33. See Paul J. Donahue, "Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch," in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Jun., 1978), pp. 81–93.

34. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* 10.1–3; 8.1.

35. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 6.1.

36. *Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* 3.1; *Magnesians* 8.1.

37. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans* 2.1; 5.2; *Trallians* 10.1.

38. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 9.1–2.

39. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 6.2.

40. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* 16.2.

41. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 11.1.

42. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* 7.1.

43. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians* 9.1.

44. John, who was Jewish himself, directs his invective at Jews who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and are therefore not *real Jews* from his perspective (3:9). Ignatius, who was Greek, fulminates against Christians who observe Jewish customs and therefore are not *real Christians* in his estimation.

45. *Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* 6.1; *Smyrneans* 8.1; 9.1.

46. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* 6.1; cf. *Trallians* 3.1; *Smyrnans* 8.1.

47. For the historical background of this concept, see Kenneth Strand, "The Rise of the Monarchical Episcopate," in *Three Essays on Early Church History* (Braun-Brumfield, 1967), pp. 65–88.

48. *Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp* 4.3; 5.1; 6.1.

49. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 3.1.

50. E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 35.

51. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 4.1.

52. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans* 8.1; *Philadelphians* 6.2; *Magnesians* 7.2.

53. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 10.1

54. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrneans* 7.2; 4.2

55. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians* 6.1

56. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Magnesians* 10.1; cf. *Epistle of Ignatius to the Romans* 3.3; 1 John 4:6

57. 2 Tim 3:15–16; cf. 1 Tim 5:18, where a saying of Jesus is juxtaposed to a passage from the Torah and collectively labeled "scripture."

58. 1 Tim 1:2; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 21; 2 Tim 3:8; Titus 1:13. Compare to Paul's understanding of "faith" in Rom 4:9–22.

59. See H. C. Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective* (Westminster/John Knox, 1980), pp. 118–19; J. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, pp. 351–52, 361; J. C. Beker, *Heirs of Paul* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 36–47.

60. Indirect evidence suggests that the writer of the Pastoral Epistles was Ignatius' disciple, Polycarp. See "Polycarp von Smyrna und die Pastoralbriefe" in *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums* (Mohr, 1963), pp. 197–252.

61. H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, p. 66, see also pp. 297–305.

62. 1 Tim 6:20; cf. 1:19. This is a clear allusion to gnostic or gnosticizing opponents within the church.

63. Many scholars assume that the invective in the Pastoral Epistles targets a group of Jewish-Christian gnostics. However, the specific accusations made do not mesh to form a coherent picture of a single group. For example, these opponents are castigated both for teaching the Law (1 Tim 1:7; Titus 1:14) and for advocating a false gnosis (1 Tim 6:20; 4:7). Yet gnostic teachings known from other sources adamantly reject Jewish convention. The polemic in these letters is best understood as a stereotypical rant against heresy, Jewish and gnostic alike. See H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 303–4.

64. Mark 7:15; 2:27; 3:35; 2:17; Matt 20:16.

65. John 8:31–59; 19:4–21.

66. Matt 7:15; cf. 2 Pet 2:1; 1 John 4:1.

67. *Epistle of Polycarp* 7.1–2.

Part II

A PILGRIMAGE TO JERUSALEM

The book of Revelation is a web of extraordinary complexity, spun of innumerable allusions and literary references. The interconnecting threads are both internal—serving to foreshadow future developments or recapitulate preceding episodes—and external, drawing on established scriptures to provide context and authority.

The word pictures embedded within that matrix are fluid and dynamic. Over and over again, potent images emerge, recede, mutate, and reappear in a modified guise, thereby progressively elaborating and expanding the central themes of the book. The resulting trajectory is not, however, so much a linear sequence of discrete events as a continuous cycling and metamorphosis of core symbols and concepts.

This is not to say that Revelation lacks overall direction. The book is undeniably forward-looking, progressing inexorably from the promises made in the seven epistles to the fulfillment pictured in the final two chapters, but that movement is concentric and spiraling rather than straight and undeviating. John's narrative continually doubles back or jumps ahead, weaving a kaleidoscopic pattern into the literary fabric.

For that reason, the exegesis will not follow the traditional scholarly method of analyzing the text in sequence, with an exhaustive explanation of each detail in the order in which it appears. Instead our path through the book will be topical and meandering, pausing as needed to elucidate a particular point.

Chapter Five

In the Throne Room of the Great King

We begin our journey with the grand spectacle of royal investiture:

> After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. The first voice like a trumpet which I had heard speaking to me said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." Immediately I was in the Spirit; and there before me was a throne in heaven, with one sitting on the throne. The one sitting there was in appearance like a jasper stone and sardius; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.
>
> Coming from the throne were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. Before the throne, seven lamps of fire were blazing, representing the seven Spirits of God. Also before the throne was a sea of glass, like crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and behind. The first creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like that of a man, and the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings covered with eyes all around and underneath. Day and night they never stop chanting, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."
>
> Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the One sitting on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the One sitting on the throne and worship the One who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and because of your will they exist and were created."
>
> Then I saw in the right hand of the One sitting on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaim in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to

> open the scroll or to look inside it. I began to sob because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look inside it. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered. He can open the scroll and its seven seals."
>
> Then I saw, amid the throne and the four living creatures and the elders, a Lamb standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out to all the earth. He came forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the One sitting on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to break its seals; for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth."
>
> Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and they numbered myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands. In a loud voice they sang, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Then I heard every created thing in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the One sitting on the throne, and to the Lamb, be praise and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." The four living creatures said, "Amen" and the elders fell down and worshiped. (4:1–5:14)

This scene is central to the plan and conception of Revelation. Within the overall scheme of the book, it functions as a sort of hinge or pivot, linking "the things that are"—the present circumstances of the church, as described in the preceding seven epistles—with "the things which must take place after this," as revealed in subsequent visions (1:19; cf. 4:1). Here the main themes of the letters are picked up, reiterated, and expanded, even as new motifs are introduced, setting the stage for the dramatic disclosures to follow.

EXEGESIS

The vision begins with "a door standing open in heaven," a circumstance that presupposes the compartmentalized three-story universe of ancient cosmology. Hades likewise has a locked "door" (9:2). In each case, the door serves to seal off the supernatural world from the plane of mundane human existence. John, however, has been granted temporary access to the celestial realm in order to receive a prophetic commission.

Inside he sees a vast throne room arranged in concentric circles, with the sanctity and status of each circle indicated by its relative position. At the very center of the array is "the One sitting on the throne," the ultimate source of all authority and holiness. Immediately surrounding the seated deity are four hybrid creatures. These winged beasts are analogous to—and

originally inspired by—the griffins, sphinxes, and lamassu that commonly adorned entranceways to ancient Near Eastern temples, city gates, and throne rooms. Monsters of this kind functioned as sentinels guarding the space within, a role retained by the cherubim in biblical tradition (Gen 3:24; Ezek 28:14).

The next circle comprises twenty-four thrones, each occupied by an elder wearing a golden crown. The institutional basis of these dignitaries has long been debated, as no exact counterpart is known from Jewish literature.[1] The basic idea is perhaps derived from earlier visions of approaching exaltation: "Yahweh of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before his elders manifest his glory" (Isa 24:23). In any case, the main function of the elders as portrayed here is to serve as heavenly representatives of the human community of worshippers.

Finally, enclosing the inner circles of divine government stands an undifferentiated throng consisting of many millions of angels (5:11; 7:11). The overall picture is thus one of God enthroned in majesty, surrounded by his subjects and the various officials that together constitute his royal court.

Before the throne blaze "seven lamps," identified more particularly as "the seven spirits of God" (4:5; cf. 1:4). The earthly prototype for these luminaries is the menorah, a seven-branched lampstand made of pure gold which stood in front of the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem temple, where it burned "before Yahweh" (Exod 27:20–21; 25:31–40; 2 Chr 4:20). The identification of this sacred fixture with the "seven spirits of God" is likely an allusion to the seven archangels of Jewish lore (*1 En* 20:1–8, 81:5; *Tob* 12:15; cf. Rev 8:2). In the distant background of this idea, one can discern the seven zodiacal deities of Mesopotamian astrology, now demoted to "spirits" subservient to the biblical God.

Further enhancing the splendor of the scene is a vast crystalline sea stretching out from the throne (4:6). As originally conceived, this sea rested above the firmament of the sky, where it served as the source of rain (Amos 9:6: Ps 104:3, 13). By John's time, the idea of a celestial sea had become largely ornamental and symbolic, as it is here. This "sea" holds no water. Only the firmament remains—a hard, glassy pavement on which the host of heaven stands (15:2).

The seated deity radiates such iridescence as to invite a comparison to precious stones (4:3). The three jewels mentioned here are significant, for they subtly allude to an episode in the book of Ezekiel, where the same three stones appear as the first, middle, and last entries within a larger list. The context there is a highly satirical dirge for a primordial king, who arrogantly claimed "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods in the heart of the seas" (Ezek 28:2). Proud of his great "splendor," this pseudo-god adorned himself with "every precious stone … sardius … jasper … and emerald" (Ezek 28:13). Ezekiel's

parody was directed against the Jewish high priest, who wore a ceremonial breastplate encrusted with those same precious stones.[2] John, however, has a bigger target in view.

The primary activity of the heavenly court, both here and in subsequent scenes, is to praise the Creator. The winged creatures unceasingly chant a version of the trisagion, a threefold affirmation of God's holiness (4:8; cf. Isa 6:3). Upon hearing this cue, the elders prostate themselves, then glorify God with a hymn of their own. As the vision unfolds, the chorus of praise progressively extends outward to include the angelic host and then "every created thing in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea" (5:11–13), until all beings are united in worship of "the One sitting on the throne."

But John has not been summoned merely to marvel at the splendors of heaven. Like other visionaries before him, the prophet has been brought before the divine council to witness events of critical importance for the future of humanity (Jer 23:18; 1 Kgs 22:19–23; Amos 3:7; 7:1–9).

What he sees initially is a scroll, with writing inside and out, resting in the open palm of the deity (5:1). Seven seals are affixed to ensure that its contents remain secret. As shown by events subsequent to its unsealing, the scroll contains divine decrees prescribing the culminating events of world history. The basic idea has also been drawn from the book of Ezekiel, where the prophet is handed a scroll full of "lamentations, mourning, and woe," written "on the front and the back" (Ezek 2:9–10). John sees a similar scroll of destiny, but with a major difference. Previous prophets had been told "Seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future" (Dan 8:26; cf. Isa 29:11; *1 En* 81:1–4). John, in contrast, is commanded: "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book for the time is near" (22:10; 10:10–11; cf. Ezek 3:1–11). The long awaited moment has come to break the seals and unleash the woes and triumphs of the end time, thus consummating the divine plan.

But now a moment of uncertainty intrudes: who has the authority and moral stature to undertake such a task? In a booming voice, an angelic herald calls out to all corners of creation, asking if anyone is worthy of opening the seals. The query goes unanswered: no one, in any of the three levels of the ancient cosmos—heaven, earth, and the underworld—is able to meet the challenge. The suspense builds as John begins to weep unrestrainedly. Will the divine decree remain unopened, leaving history unfulfilled and humanity unredeemed? As uncertainty teeters on the verge of crisis, one of the elders steps forward to comfort the seer, saying that a champion has been found and that he has already achieved victory. The scroll will be unsealed after all.

The hero is identified as the "Lion from the Tribe of Judah" and the "Root of David" (5:5). The first title refers to the blessing of Jacob, in which the patriarch calls his son Judah a "lion's whelp" who shall rule over the nations

(Gen 49:9–10). The second title alludes to a prophecy in the book of Isaiah, which speaks of a "branch" which shall sprout from "the roots" of the Davidic lineage and "bear fruit," ushering in an era of righteousness and peace (Isa 11:1–10; cf. Rev 22:16). In the first and second centuries CE, these were stock elements of the Jewish messianic hope and as such, would have immediately conjured up a host of related ideas and expectations.

John's attention is now drawn to a Lamb standing amid the royal entourage (5:6). The image evokes dual connotations.[3] In the forefront is the conquering Messiah of first century Judaism, who was often pictured symbolically in animal form, in some cases as a sheep. In the *Testament of Joseph*, for example, we hear of a horned lamb who is to rise up and deliver the flock from the beasts that prey upon it: "all the beasts rushed upon [the lamb], and the lamb overcame them and destroyed them and trampled them underfoot."[4] The Lamb of Revelation is likewise an indomitable warrior who has "conquered" (17:14; 6:15–17). As visible proof of his might, the Lamb has seven horns—symbolic of massive strength—which will enable him to defeat and destroy the enemies of God. He is therefore uniquely qualified, out of all beings in the cosmos, to unseal the scroll of destiny and put its decrees into effect.

Yet this mighty hero unexpectedly bears the wounds of sacrificial slaughter. John here invokes a second set of ideas associated with a "lamb." Prior to the exodus from Egypt, Israel's ancestors had slaughtered a lamb and marked the doorposts of their huts with its blood, thereby ensuring that Yahweh would "pass over" when he struck down the firstborn of their oppressors (Exod 12:21–29). During the annual Passover festival, this sacrifice was renewed, either ritually or symbolically, to commemorate the events that had brought the nation of Israel into being (Exod 12:2–14; cf. 1 Cor 5:7). By offering himself as an expiatory sacrifice, the Lamb of Revelation has similarly redeemed a vast throng to serve in his own kingdom (5:9–10; cf. John 1:29; 1 Pet 1:18–19).

The Lamb steps forward and plucks the scroll from the hand of "the One sitting on the throne." The transfer of the scroll of destiny into his possession carries with it a commensurate transfer of authority and status. The Lamb has now become the eschatological Lord of the world, commander of the armies of heaven, with the power to distribute life and death as he chooses (1:18; 2:7; 13:8b). Attended by universal acclaim, extending from the depths of the underworld to the heights of heaven, the new regent ascends the throne to sit beside its current occupant (5:13; cf. 3:21; 7:17; 22:1). Having assumed his rightful role as the "King of kings and Lord of lords," the Lamb will now rule over the nations "with a rod of iron" (19:15–16; cf. Ps 2:1–9).

The scene thus triumphantly concludes in accordance with ancient mythological paradigms, with order affirmed, salvation achieved, and the rule of God established. The anointed champion has successfully over-

come the forces of dissolution that threaten the continued existence of the community and the people have responded with jubilation and acclaim.

COMMENTARY

Though surrounded by a chorus of praises from "every created thing," some spectators—both ancient and modern—have been unable or unwilling to join in the joyous festivities attending the enthronement of the new King. Instead of finding spiritual repose in the triumph of heaven, these bystanders have been afflicted by a gnawing disquietude. Having glimpsed some inchoate horror lurking in the shadows just outside the glare of the celestial court, a few have adamantly withheld their obeisance.

Something seems amiss here, though exactly what is difficult to determine. Is there perhaps a subtle irony concealed in the bombastic praises of the saints, a discordant note resonating faintly amid the thundering paeans of the heavenly choir? Or perhaps it is the sheer profusion of hyperbole—completely detached from any grounded appraisal of what is being said and done—that elicits this nagging unease. Despite its apparent magnificence, the drama of enthronement seems overwrought, too highly exaggerated to be entirely credible. It is not enough, for example, for the elders to kneel in homage before the celestial King; instead they fall on their faces and fling their crowns before the throne with an obsequiousness that borders on imbecility. Nor is it enough that they perform this obeisance once. With each new antiphon from the seraphim, the twenty-four elders repeat the exercise in an endless cycle of praise and groveling (4:9–11).

Then there is the menagerie surrounding the deity: four creatures, each in the form of a different animal, with six wings "covered with eyes all around and underneath," and the Lamb himself, with seven horns and seven eyes (4:7–8; 5:6). John has drawn the descriptive details of this zoological committee from a variety of traditional sources, but their combination here is so bizarre as to defy imagination, as if the inherent grotesqueness of the scene were being deliberately emphasized. The inhabitants of this heaven, it would seem, are better suited to serve as curiosities in a traveling freak show than as inspirational objects of spiritual contemplation. It is true, of course, that John's imagery is largely symbolic and therefore not to be understood in strictly literal terms. Still the question remains: are these symbols of transcendent wonder or of disease and defilement?

Next there is the deity himself. Though the divine throne dominates the scene, its occupant is curiously passive, dormant almost to the point of total absence. Throughout the investiture ceremony, "the sitting One" maintains a fixed pose, silent and unmoving, never once speaking or gesturing. The seated

figure does not, for example, actively "give" the scroll to the new regent; rather the Lamb "takes" it from the deity's open hand (5:7). When John compares the "likeness" [*homoios horasei*] of this figure to a "jasper stone" are we to understand that statement as a spiritual metaphor or as descriptive literalism? Is this truly the "living God" known to ancient Israel[5] or a mere semblance, crafted of "stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk"?[6]

Beyond the unsettling aesthetics of the vision, discerning readers often find themselves struggling with disturbing ethical questions. Many have wondered whether the events pictured here and in subsequent scenes are compatible with basic Christian values such as forgiveness, humility, and compassion. Consider, for example, the universal acclaim of the Lamb as "worthy" (5:9–13). Given the acts of murder, torture, and carnage that ensue, any such claim seems wildly at odds with what the vision actually discloses. The deeds of the newly crowned king are more directly comparable to those of Assurbanipal or Genghis Khan than to those of Jesus or Buddha.

Now it is possible, of course, that John is unaware of the glaring contradiction between the presumed worthiness of the Lamb and his actual conduct as depicted in subsequent episodes. Blinded by fervor, the prophet is perhaps incapable of seeing the disjunction between the ideals of peace and joy that are to be realized in the eschatological kingdom of God (21:3–4) and the political implementation of that same kingdom through terror and brute force (14:10–11, 18–20). Certainly one could point to similar inconsistencies in other scriptures, including the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran. It could be argued that John's vision manifests an antique religiosity that now seems bizarre and morally dubious, but in its original context would have been perceived as normal and acceptable.

That is not the only possibility, however. Exaggerated rhetoric is characteristic not only of fanaticism, but also of satire. Hyperbole is in fact a defining attribute of the genre. A satire takes up the salient traits of a person, idea, or institution and deliberately distorts these so as to bring out some moral contradiction. This rhetorical strategy is pervasive in the Hebrew Bible, especially among the prophets.[7] Deutero-Isaiah, for example, belittled the worship of idols by picturing a craftsman meticulously carving a figure, burning the shavings to cook a meal, then falling down before the wooden effigy, praying for deliverance (Isa 44:9–20; cf. 41:7; 46:5–6). Greek and Roman writers also regularly employed this method as a means of exposing and deflating pretentiousness, the most famous example being Aristophanes' satirical mimicry of a Socratic dialogue: "I tread on air and contemplate the sun."[8] To be effective, the satire must be sufficiently true to life to be recognizable, yet sufficiently exaggerated to bring out the inherent ridiculousness of the intended victim.[9] By exposing the target to public ridicule, the satirist undermines its authority and sanctity.

Given the atmosphere of impassioned adoration and universal worship that pervades John's vision, a satirical intent may seem out of the question. In a series of doxologies and hymns, all the inhabitants of heaven and earth glorify the Lamb and "the One sitting on the throne," using language that undoubtedly reflects the liturgies of the early church (4:8–11; 5:9–14). Yet the primary themes of that praise—the sovereignty of God, the awe-inspiring power of the Creator, and the "purchase" of men and women through sacrificial blood—were not universally accepted teachings. As noted in an earlier discussion, these are the same points of doctrine that gnostic Christians explicitly rejected. Could it be that these hymns are presented not as examples of true devotion but the reverse, as evidence of false worship and delusion? Earlier prophets had condemned the "gaiety of harps" and the "shouts" of drunken revelry that characterized Jerusalem, the "city of chaos" (Isa 24:7–12; 5:14; Ezek 23:42). Could it be that a similar perspective pertains here as well?

The specific source of John's vision is key to understanding its intent. By his own account, the heavenly throne room does not appear before John spontaneously, in response to contemplation or prayer; rather the vision is mediated through an external agent, namely "the first voice like a trumpet, which I had heard speaking to me" (4:1; cf. 1:10). We have already noted that this metaphor is directly based on the "little horn" as described in the book of Daniel. There we are told that the king symbolized by the horn will "speak boastfully" (Dan 7:8; cf. Rev 13:5) and "exalt and magnify himself above every god," even going so far as to consider himself "equal to the Commander of hosts" (Dan 8:11; 11:36; cf. Rev 3:21; 22:1). Through "smooth words," this king would "turn to godlessness those who violate the covenant" and "give great honor to those who acknowledge him and appoint them as rulers over many" (Dan 11:32, 39; cf. Rev 2:26; 5:10). As a result of his great cunning, the horn would acquire vast power and "cause appalling destruction" (Dan 8:24–25; cf. Rev 6:1ff.). Ultimately his reach would extend into heaven itself, enabling him to "throw down to earth some of the host and some of the stars and trample them" (Dan 8:9–10; cf. Rev 6:13; 12:4). The "holy people" would also be "given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time" (Dan 7:21, 25; cf. Rev 13:5–7). Having thus overcome all opposition, the horn would "cause deceit to flourish" and "fling truth to the ground and impose its will and prosper" (Dan 8:12, 25; cf. Rev 11:15–18). All this certainly applies, in a general way, to the dominion of the Lamb, as graphically depicted in subsequent episodes. Though loose, the correspondence is by no means chance. What is being disclosed here is not the imagined glories of heaven but the establishment of the "abomination of desolation" as pictured in the book of Daniel (Dan 11:31; cf. Matt 24:15–25).

As we proceed, it shall become increasingly clear that the throne room scene does not present us with a transcendent ideal, which we are meant to emulate. The Lamb, the figure seated on the throne, the heavenly choir, and

the cherubim are not symbols of that which John adores, but parodies of that which he detests. The prophet has taken up the pious fantasies of his enemies, exaggerated these almost to the point of absurdity, and flung the resulting caricature back into their faces. Incredibly, the church officials targeted by John's parody seem to have swallowed his sarcasm whole, with only occasional symptoms of indigestion.

Understood in that light, the oft-repeated formula "Whoever has an ear, let them hear" takes on a deeper significance. The phrase—which appears eight times in Revelation—is ultimately derived from the commission of the 8th century BCE prophet Isaiah: "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not understand; keep on looking, but do not perceive.'" (Isa 6:9). The motif of spiritual deafness was subsequently taken up and elaborated by other Hebrew prophets (e.g., Ezek 3:27; 12:2), later reemerging as a stock element in the gospel tradition.[10] Like his predecessors, John uses the formula to distinguish those who are receptive to the prophetic word from those who are not. To those with discernment, his message serves as a stern warning, but for the deluded, it merely reaffirms and further hardens their preconceptions (Dan 12:10; cf. Rev 22:11). Lacking "ears," they hear only what they have already chosen to believe.

NOTES

1. For a brief survey of list of possible options, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 323–26; C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 360–62.

2. Exod 28:15–21; see R. Wilson, "The Death of the King of Tyre" in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Marks and R. Good (Guilford: Four Corners Publishing, 1987), pp. 211–18; P. M. Bogaert, "Le Chérub de Tyr," in *Prophetie und geschichtliche Wirklichkeit im alten Israel*, ed. R. Liwak and S. Wagner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1991), pp. 29–38; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1080–88; D. Arthur, *A Smooth Stone*, pp. 221–32; idem, "Conflict and Convergence in the Book of Ezekiel" (forthcoming).

3. See the excursus in D. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, pp. 368–73.

4. *Testament of Joseph* 19:3–10; cf. *1 Enoch* 89:45–49; 90:9–12, 37–38.

5. Rev 7:2; cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Acts 14:15; 1 Thess 1:9; Pss 42:2; 84:2; Jer 10:10; Dan 6:26.

6. Rev 9:20; cf. 13:14–15.

7. See T. Jemielity, *Satire and the Hebrew Prophets* (Westminster John Knox, 1992); Z. Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* (Scholars Press, 1998).

8. *Clouds*, in *The Complete Plays of Aristophanes*, trans. Moses Hadas (Bantam, 1962), p. 108. For the subversive use of satire and parody in Greco-Roman literature, see G. Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse* (Mercer UP, 1999), pp. 150–51.

9. C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 600–1.

10. For example, Mark 4:9–12; Luke 8:8; Matt 11:15; 13:9; see also *Gospel of Thomas* sayings 8, 21, 24, 63, 65, 96; *Gospel of Mary* 7.8–9; 8.10–11; cf. *Secret Book of John* NHL II 22.25–28.

Chapter Six

The Seven Seals

From the splendor and pageantry of the royal court, we now enter a dark domain dominated by terror, violence, and raw cruelty. As the seer watches, the scroll of destiny is unsealed, setting in motion the divine plan inscribed therein. The twin goals of judgment and salvation, implicit in sacred history from its inception, are at last to be consummated, bringing the end of the present era and the dawn of a new age.

The woes that now ensue are presented in three cycles of seven judgments, consisting of seals, trumpets, and bowls. Each cycle is organized in a similar fashion. The first four judgments in each series form a distinct group of narrow focus and limited impact, bringing mass affliction but not total destruction. The next three episodes broaden the scope and escalate in intensity, producing increasingly catastrophic consequences. Each cycle culminates in a final judgment, variously conceived as the decimation of earth's inhabitants, the dissolution of the natural world, or the triumph of evil. An emphatic theophany then closes the cycle, thereby revealing the presence of God within the judgment (8:5; 11:19; 16:18).

As noted earlier, the progression from cycle to cycle is not strictly linear. This is especially obvious in the repeated meltdown of the cosmos, which of course would logically preclude any further judgments. For that reason, the three septets are best understood not as three unique sets of catastrophes, but as variations on the same theme, with each new series adding further color and drama to the overall impression of total disaster.

The three cycles do not, however, circle back each time to the same starting point; instead the sequence spirals upwards along a scale of escalating intensity. With each pass, the consequences become increasingly drastic, further

adding to the victims' terror and suffering. Accordingly, in the first cycle of seven seals, a quarter of humanity is killed; in the second cycle of seven trumpets, a third of humanity dies; finally, in the third cycle of seven bowls "every living thing" on land and in water is afflicted. By incrementally ratcheting the scope of destruction in this way, John prepares the reader for the emotional catharsis of the total collapse of the existing world order (21:1).

The sequence of calamities begins with a cycle of seven seals:

> Then I saw the Lamb break one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out with a voice like thunder, "Come." I looked, and there before me was a white horse. He who sat on it had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he went out as a conqueror in conquest.
>
> When he broke the second seal, I heard the second living creature call out, "Come." Out came another horse, a bright red one. Its rider was authorized to take peace from the earth, so that men would slay one another; and a great sword was given to him.
>
> When he broke the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come." I looked, and there before me was a black horse. Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what seemed to be a voice amid the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine."
>
> When the Lamb broke the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come." I looked and there before me was pale horse. Its rider's name was Death; and Hades followed behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with plague and by the wild beasts of the earth.
>
> When he broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony which they had kept. They cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Master, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe; and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers—who were to be killed just as they had been—was complete.
>
> When he broke the sixth seal, I looked and there was a great earthquake. The sun turned black as sackcloth and the moon turned blood red; and the stars in the sky fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops unripe figs when shaken by a gale. The sky split and rolled up like a scroll and every mountain and island was moved from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the nobles and the commanders and the rich and the powerful and every slave and every free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of the One sitting on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" …
>
> When the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour…An angel, holding a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the saints, on

> the golden altar before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, along with the prayers of the saints, rose up to God from the angel's hand. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth; and there were peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake. (6:1–17; 8:1, 3–5)

OVERVIEW

The progressive disclosure of the divine plan, revealed incrementally as each seal is broken, is at once a continuation of the throne room scene and the start of a new eschatological drama. During the ceremony of investiture, the Lamb was declared worthy to open the scroll; now we are shown the consequences of that act, as terror builds on terror, moving through a series of epicycles towards a crescendo of death and destruction.

The first four woes form a unit, distinguished by a consistent theme, recurrent imagery, and strict parallelism of form. Each episode begins with the opening of a seal, followed by a summons to a rider to come forth. The rider is then commissioned to carry out a judgment against the inhabitants of earth.

The basic imagery underlying the sequence has been drawn from the book of Zechariah, where four colored horses are similarly invoked to serve as divine agents (1:8–17; 6:1–8). John has, however, taken up that idea and modified it to suit his own prophetic purposes. The differences are illuminating: where Zechariah's horses are hitched to chariots, the horses in Revelation have riders; where the horses in Zechariah collectively symbolize the four winds on their daily patrol of the earth, the horses in Revelation represent four scourges; where the four chariots in Zechariah find "peace and rest" predominating throughout the world, the four horsemen of Revelation are active agents of terror and destruction. These differences in presentation derive from an underlying difference in intent. Zechariah's horses convey an oracle of reassurance; John's are harbingers of doom.

The narrative framework provided by Zechariah has been fleshed out with details drawn from another line of tradition, based on Israel's original constitution as a covenant people.[1] According to the book of Leviticus, the contract between Yahweh and the religious community entailed a list of specific blessings and curses that would be incurred depending on subsequent conduct (26:1–28). If the Israelites eschewed idols and kept the Sabbath, Yahweh would bless them with "rains in their season," "peace in the land," and victory in war, so that "your enemies will fall before you by the sword." However, if the Israelites failed to observe the conditions of the covenant, Yahweh would bring upon them "sudden terror," plague, defeat in battle, wild beasts, and famine. The transgressors would be punished "seven times for your sins" (Lev 26:28), as graphically demonstrated here in the cycle of seven seals.

Though John was undoubtedly familiar with the covenantal curse formulas in Leviticus, he has derived his own sequence of four disasters from their secondary restatement in the biblical prophets, especially Jeremiah (14:11–12; 15:1–3) and Ezekiel (5:5–17; 14:12–21). In this instance, Ezekiel has provided the main template, as indicated by the summarizing statement which concludes the sequence: "they were given power over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with plague and by the wild beasts of the earth" (6:8). John here alludes to his predecessor's oracle declaring that Jerusalem would be punished through the "four grievous judgments" of "sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague" (Ezek 14:21).

In both Ezekiel and Leviticus, idolatry is cited as the primary reason for invoking the covenantal curses (Lev 26:1; Ezek 6:1–13). As we proceed, it shall become clear that this is John's main point of contention as well. The inhabitants of earth worship "the image of the beast" with such tenacity that they prefer to suffer the consequences rather than "repent of the works of their hands" (13:15; 9:20; cf. Ps 115:4–7). Idolatry is thus the root cause of the mass slaughter that now ensues.

The four horsemen do not, however, represent self-actualizing curses, nor do they come forth of their own volition, spurred by a malicious whim. In each episode, the Lamb initiates the sequence by breaking a seal on the scroll. In response, one of the throne attendants issues a summons to a rider. Next the rider is divinely commissioned for his task, as indicated by the authorization formula "it was given to him," which has God as the implied subject. Only then does the rider go forth to kill his assigned allotment of "earth-dwellers."

Given the plain meaning of the text, attempts to soften or deflect responsibility for these afflictions are misguided. John is both explicit and emphatic on this point: the carnage proceeds from direct commands issued by the ruling elite of heaven (6:3, 5, 7; cf. 16:1, 9). It is not the case, therefore, that the God of Revelation merely "permits" or "tolerates" evil, as some commentators have claimed.[2] On the contrary, this is a God who actively incites and licenses atrocities. Though various agents accomplish the deeds of death and destruction, ultimate responsibility lies with the Lamb and the "One sitting on the throne."

EXEGESIS

The sequence of four woes begins with the summons of a fearsome warrior mounted on a white horse (6:2). The identity of this first horseman has provoked considerable debate.[3] Some commentators have correctly observed that the rider is reminiscent of the victorious Christ who appears in a later vision (19:11–16). Both figures ride a white horse, both wear royal insignia,

both are "conquerors." The main objection to associating the two has been the observation, also correct, that the first horseman inextricably belongs to a series of four, all of the same character and purpose—namely, to serve as agents of death. For obvious reasons, many have felt that these are hardly suitable companions for the Lamb of God. To this consideration, some have added the further objection that while the horseman is armed with a bow, Christ is armed with a sword and where the horseman wears a single crown, the victorious Christ wears multiple diadems symbolic of his status as "King of kings."

The last of these objections is easily swept aside, for John frequently varies the details in his imagery, even when alluding to the same person, place, or thing. For example, in a scene depicting the "harvest of the earth," we are shown Christ once again, this time riding on a cloud, wearing a golden crown, and flourishing a sickle as a weapon (14:14). The moral objection also vanishes once one realizes that John does not share in the ideal of Christ the warrior. In his eyes, the conquering Lamb is as surely the embodiment of evil as are the four horsemen.

That John means for us to see a connection between the two riders is clear from the phrase "and behold, a white horse and one seated on it," which appears word-for-word in both passages (6:2; 19:11). The parallel phraseology is fully intentional. The first horseman is meant to prefigure the full disclosure of the Antichrist at Armageddon.[4]

A second horseman is now summoned, this time riding a red horse, symbolic of bloodshed (6:4). His mission is to "take peace from the earth" by inciting men to slay each other. John may have in view here a motif drawn from the ideology of holy war. During battle, Yahweh was said to intervene on behalf of his consecrated warriors by striking the opposing army with "a great panic," causing its soldiers to turn their swords against each other (Judg 7:22; cf. Zech 14:13; Isa 19:2). In this instance, however, the frenzy and resulting chaos are universally experienced by all humankind.

When the third seal is broken, one of the throne attendants summons another rider, mounted on a black horse (6:5–6). In his hand, the rider holds a balance, commonly used for commercial transactions. An unidentified voice from the royal court instructs the horseman: "A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius; and do not damage the oil and the wine."

Without exception, commentators have missed the point of this seemingly irrelevant remark. That it depicts the dire conditions of famine—where a day's wages is insufficient to buy even basic necessities—is generally recognized.[5] But that circumstance is tangential to John's main purpose, which is to disclose the character of the speaker, who sees in the resulting scarcity a prime opportunity for financial gain. The horseman is instructed to demand an exorbitantly high price for staples such as wheat

and to take special care with high margin goods such as wine and oil, thereby yielding maximum profitability. Through this display of naked greed, the speaker reveals his true character as a "trader"—one who deals in cargoes of "wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat" (18:11–13; cf. 3:18; 13:17). The voice is said to come from "amid the four living creatures." Earlier John located the Lamb in that very spot (5:6), and that is undoubtedly who speaks now.

When the fourth seal is broken, yet another a rider appears mounted on a ghostly steed, pale as a corpse. This horseman is identified as Death; following close behind on foot is his inseparable companion, Hades. Together the pair sweep across the earth, gathering up the slain of the previous three riders and reaping new victims of their own. The slaughter ceases only when the rider's assigned quota is attained.

Here again, John is providing an oblique hint about the character and intentions of the protagonist in this eschatological drama. In his initial self-disclosure, the exalted Christ proclaims "I have the keys to Death and Hades" (1:18), indicating that these domains are subject to his personal authority. The depredations pictured here therefore take place under his sanction. Death and Hades have been released from their confinement by the holder of the key, with a commission to "kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by the beasts of the earth" (6:8; cf. 9:1–11).

With the opening of the fifth seal, the scene shifts from earth to heaven. There John sees the souls of Christian martyrs lying beneath the altar in front of the celestial throne (6:9–10; cf. 8:3). This scenario presupposes a latent symbolism unfamiliar to modern readers. During ritual sacrifices, the blood of the slain animal was typically poured out at the base of the altar (Exod 29:12; Lev 4:7). Blood was thought to contain the soul or life force of the sacrificial animal, making it an effective agent for atonement and expiation (Lev 17:11, 14). The souls of the martyrs, who have been sacrificed for the cause of the gospel, are thus located at the very spot where their blood was poured out before God.

Despite their repose in that holy place, the souls of the slain martyrs are not at peace. Instead they cry out loudly for vindication, asking how long before their deaths are avenged.[6] This insistent plea stands in marked contrast to the final prayers of earlier Christian martyrs such as Stephen (Acts 7:60) and Jesus (Luke 23:34), who both asked that their executioners be forgiven. Noting this disparity, a number of exegetes have deemed the prayers of the martyrs in Revelation to be "pre-Christian."[7]

That assessment is valid insofar as it recognizes a fundamental disjunction with the Christian ideal of forgiveness (e.g., Matt 5:44; 18:21–22; Mark 11:25). The appraisal is inaccurate, however, to the extent that it does not acknowledge that prayers for vengeance have been part of Christianity from its inception right up to the present. Tertullian, for example, wrote of his eager

anticipation for the glorious day when kings and all those who "persecuted the Christian name" would "groan in the lowest darkness," having been consigned to "fires more fierce than those with which in the days of their pride they raged against the followers of Christ" (*De Spec.* 30; cf. 2 Thess 1:6–9). These fantasies were realized historically during the Inquisition with the systematic incarceration, torture, and immolation of thousands of presumed heretics.

The cry of the martyred saints contains two related but starkly differing demands, the first for judgment and the second for vengeance (6:10). The first part of that plea is broadly concerned with justice, which in the ancient world characteristically took the form of an authoritative ruling by the king, a priest, or some other recognized official. Ideally, the judgment restored wholeness to a situation that had fallen into disequilibrium due to crime, sin, or persecution. An animal had been stolen, a contract abrogated, or in the case of the martyrs, the innocent have been slaughtered. Justice redressed the resulting imbalance by demanding an equivalent compensation from the guilty: hence the famous biblical injunction "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand" (Exod 21:24–25). A judgment was considered just, however, only if it was impartial and took into account the rights of all parties involved.

In sparsely populated rural areas, where central authority was weak or ineffective, the custom of blood vengeance occupied the vacancy elsewhere filled by a recognized court of law. In this situation, responsibility for exacting retribution fell on the immediate family or clan rather than upon an independent official. Though fear of reprisal constrained random violence, the absence of an impartial mediator sometimes led to uncontrolled escalation. Limited retribution could become all-consuming revenge, which would not stop at proportionate compensation. Personal satisfaction, rather than social equilibrium, then became the driving imperative. Blood had been spilled, and blood cries out for more blood (Gen 4:10).

That it is primarily revenge rather than justice that is at stake here is clear from the celebratory glee of the saints after the judgment is executed: "Hallelujah! Salvation and power and glory belong to our God . . . for He has avenged the blood of his slaves" (19:1–3; cf. 16:5–7; Deut 32:43). That heaven is of like mind is equally clear from an angel's announcement that the enemies of God "will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb and the smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever" (14:10–11; cf. *1 En* 27:2–3; 48:9). Evidently the wicked are to be paraded before the divine council and publically tortured for the eternal viewing pleasure of the Lamb and his cohort. Obviously justice is of peripheral concern in this scenario.

When the sixth seal is opened, the cosmos itself begins to disintegrate. The unraveling begins with a massive earthquake—a traditional sign of divine visitation (Exod 19:18)—but in this case more particularly understood as a harbinger of the "great and dreadful day of Yahweh," as described in the oracles of the classical prophets (e.g., Isa 2:12–21; Joel 2:1–11). That John specifically has that eschatological event in view is clear from his subsequent allusion to "the great day of their wrath" (6:17).

So violent is the quaking that "every mountain and island was moved from its place" (6:14). To the ancient peoples of that region, these were symbols of stability and permanence, often conceived as home to the gods (cf. Ps 125:1). The displacement of mountains and islands therefore could mean only one thing: the world is falling apart, collapsing in on its foundations.

The catastrophic effects of the quaking reach up to the very heavens. Stars fall from the sky like figs from a storm-battered tree. The firmament ruptures and curls up like an open scroll which has been split down the middle, allowing the cut ends to roll up on either side. As if in mourning, the sun turns black as sackcloth. The moon turns red, portending imminent slaughter.

To create this picture of cosmological disaster, John has quarried materials from a wide variety of prophetic texts, which he has then reassembled in a complex mosaic. Virtually every clause contains a biblical allusion of some kind. But this is not, as might be supposed, due to lack of imagination on his part. The sixth seal is to be understood as the sum total of all preceding prophecies, the convergence of all the partial glimpses of doom seen by his predecessors, now brought together in a single, culminating catastrophe.[8]

The drastic metaphors John uses here leave little doubt that the sixth seal brings the world to an end. This is not, of course, the only end; there will be others, equally terminal, as the apocalypse continues. However, no logical contradiction is entailed. As previously noted, each of the septets culminates in final judgment. For this particular cycle, that end has now come. Subsequent repetitions merely emphasize the point.

As the cosmos collapses around them, "the kings of the earth and the nobles and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and every free man" scramble for shelter behind boulders and in caves. Finding no relief from their terror, they call upon the rocks and mountains to fall on them (6:16; cf. Luke 23:30; Hos 10:8). Far better to be crushed in an avalanche than to stand unconcealed before "the face of the One sitting on the throne."

The list of groups seized by the panic ranges from the upper levels of society (kings, nobles, and commanders) to the common citizen (the free) to the very lowest echelon (the slaves). In effect, all classes of society—the mighty as well as the humble—will flee in terror before the coming wrath.

A similar list of social categories appears later in a catalogue of the slain at Armageddon (19:18). We are undoubtedly meant to see a connection between the two episodes. What happens now is a precursor to the culminating slaughter of the final battle.

For those who have "ears," John has left an important clue regarding the deeper significance of these events. The panicked question of doomed humanity, "who can stand [before the wrath of God and the Lamb]?" closely parallels the query of those same "inhabitants of earth" when confronted by an equally terrifying monster from the abyss: "Who can wage war against [the beast]?" (6:17; 13:4; cf. 1 Sam 6:20; Joel 2:11; Mal 3:2). Could it be that these two encounters are one and the same? What could be more terrifying than to discover that the Holy One whom you thought was bringing deliverance is instead the bearer of summary judgment and death? That would indeed be a moment of sheer horror.

With the opening of the seventh seal, the crash and clamor of a world in collapse subsides, and a brief silence ensues (8:1). That this silence does not represent a cessation of punishment is clear from the events that follow. As in similar oracular announcements elsewhere in the Bible, the hush described here is an ominous harbinger of further judgments to come (Zeph 1:7–11; Zech 2:13).

An intercessory angel holding a golden censer now comes forward and stands before a golden altar—the heavenly counterpart to the altar of incense in the Jerusalem temple (8:3; cf. Exod 40:5, 26–27; 1 Chr 6:49). The angel heaps incense on the hot coals of the altar, thereby releasing a fragrant cloud of billowing smoke into the nostrils of the enthroned deity (cf. Lev 16:12–13; Num 16:6–7). Elsewhere John explicitly likens the "smoke" of incense to the "prayers of the saints" (5:8; cf. Ps 141:2). In this instance, the rising smoke is presumably the pleas of the martyrs calling for vengeance (8:4; cf. 6:10). Their petition has now been formally presented to the deity and accepted.

Accordingly, the actions of the angel now shift from priestly intercession to judgment. Scooping up coals from the altar, the angel hurls a stream of fire down upon the earth (8:5; cf. Ezek 10:2). God has heard the martyrs' pleas and will now requite their murders upon unregenerate humanity.

COMMENTARY

Despite the massive contradictions latent in this vision, one should not assume that John is incapable of recognizing the ethical incongruity in what he has shown us. Here, as many times elsewhere in Revelation, we have been presented with a moral decision. Does justice demand that we identify with the cause of the martyrs and join in the cry for vengeance? Or is this a spiritual fallacy that must inevitably lead to catastrophic consequences?

John's answer to these questions is implied in the specific way he has framed the imprecatory prayers of the martyrs. In their pleas for vengeance, the martyrs invoke the deity not as "Lord" [*kurios*]—the usual way of acknowledging divine sovereignty—but as "Master" [*despotēs*]. Elsewhere in the New Testament this form of address is generally directed to slave owners (1 Tim 6:1–2; Titus 2:9; 1 Pet 2:18). Proto-orthodox Christians invoked the same epithet to characterize their personal relationship with the deity (2 Tim 2:21; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 1:4). As "slaves of God," these Christians thought of themselves as existing under the absolute power and authority of the divine Master (Eph 6:6; 1 Pet 2:16). The followers of the Lamb evidently have the same self-understanding, since John consistently refers to them as "slaves" (2:20; 7:3; 11:18; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6).

This way of thinking about the relationship between God and humanity represents a major dividing line separating gnostic ideology from that of their proto-orthodox rivals. As members of the "kingless race," gnostic Christians rejected all forms of domination and servitude as demeaning. Slavery, to them, was the result of ignorance.[9] Knowledge of God brought liberation, not a renewed bondage to the powers of darkness: "Therefore those who know these things are freed from the archons who created the world," whereas "he who confesses the Crucified is still a slave and subject to the power of those who created our bodies."[10]

Consequently, many gnostics rejected the Christian ideal of martyrdom.[11] In their view, this supreme self-sacrifice was motivated by a fallacy: "The foolish—thinking in their heart that if they confess, 'We are Christians,' in word only but not with power, while giving themselves over to ignorance, to a human death, not knowing where they are going nor who Christ is—believe that they will find life, but mistakenly hasten towards the principalities and authorities instead. They fall into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them."[12] One cannot attain life by pursuing death. The true Father does *not* "desire a human sacrifice."[13]

John, who certainly exhibits gnostic leanings, would have agreed with that perspective. As we shall see, the martyrs are not his heroes: they are slaves, with the groveling submissiveness and mindless allegiance characteristic of the slave mentality.

It is by no means irrelevant to note that the "smoke" of the martyrs' prayers is eerily reminiscent of the "smoke" of torment rising up "forever and ever" from "those who worship the beast" (8:4; cf. 14:11; 19:3). Virtually the same language is also used to describe the "smoke rising up" [*anebē kapnos*] from the gate of the underworld (9:2). This convergence of imagery is not coincidental. Ultimately, there is no real difference between a heaven filled with cries for vengeance and a hell reverberating with shrieks of anguish. Both are in thrall to a dark and bitter passion; neither is a place where a thoughtful person would care to linger, much less dwell for eternity.

NOTES

1. See the discussion in G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 372–73.
2. For example, G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 81; E. S. Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation*, p. 84.
3. For a summary of possible interpretations, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 375–77; C. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 394.
4. For additional supporting evidence, see L. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse*, pp. 186–91.
5. For example, C. Koester, *Revelation*, p. 396; cf. Lev 26:26; Ezek 4:16.
6. Rev 6:9–11. A similar scene occurs in *1 Enoch* 47:1–4, which may have furnished the inspiration for this scenario in Revelation.
7. I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 526; M. Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 119; J. P. Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 141; R. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, p.175.
8. Compare, for example, Joel 2:30- 31; Isa 24:18–23; Zech 14:4–6.
9. *Secret Book of John* 29.16–30.11. See the discussion in K. Rudolph, *Gnosis*, pp. 266–68.
10. Basilides, as quoted by Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies* 1.24.4.
11. For an analysis of the motivating factors behind the ideal of martyrdom, see E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, pp. 70–101.
12. *Testimony of Truth* 31.22–32.8; 33.25–34.7.
13. *Testimony of Truth* 32.19–21.

Chapter Seven

The Seven Trumpets

Immediately following the cycle of seven seals, a new sequence begins, this time featuring seven trumpets:

> I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. . . . The first angel sounded his trumpet, and hail and fire mixed with blood was thrown to the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up.
>
> The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, and a third of the creatures living in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed. The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from heaven onto a third of the rivers and on the springs of waters. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the waters, because they were made bitter.
>
> The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them were darkened. A third of the day was without light and a third of the night also.
>
> Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in mid-heaven, crying out in a loud voice, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of earth because of the remaining trumpet blasts which the three angels are about to sound!"
>
> Then the fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star which had fallen from heaven to the earth and he was given the key to the shaft of the abyss. He opened the shaft of the abyss, and smoke rose up from it like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke from the abyss. Then out of the smoke came locusts upon the earth, and they were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to hurt the grass of the earth, nor any plant, nor any tree, but only the people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were authorized to torment them for five months, but not to kill them; and the agony they inflicted was like that of a

scorpion when it stings someone. In those days people will seek death and not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.
In appearance the locusts were like horses ready for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, and their hair like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had scales like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the sound of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails with stingers like scorpions, with the power to torment people for five months. They have as king over them the angel of the abyss: his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.
The first woe is past; the remaining two woes are yet to come.

Then the sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God. To the sixth angel with a trumpet, it said "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." The four angels, who had been kept ready for this hour and day and month and year, were released to kill a third of humankind. The number of mounted troops was two hundred million; I heard the number of them. The horses and riders that I saw in my vision looked like this: the riders had breastplates the color of fire and sapphire and sulfur; the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and out of their mouths came fire and smoke and sulfur. A third of humankind was killed by the three plagues of fire and smoke and sulfur that came out of their mouths, for the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails. Their tails were like serpents, having heads with which they inflict harm.

The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, or stop worshipping demons and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. Nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their immorality or their thefts. . .

The second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon.

Then the seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ; and he will reign forever and ever." Then the twenty-four elders, who sit on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, "We give you thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came. Now the time has come for judging the dead and rewarding your slaves the prophets and saints and those who fear your name, both the small and the great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Then the temple of God in heaven was opened, and within the temple the ark of his covenant could be seen, and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a massive hailstorm. (8:2; 8:7–9:21; 11:14–19)

OVERVIEW

Two themes recur throughout the trumpet septet. The first of these is the rise of a satanic kingdom, implicitly conceived as a new Egypt, the archetypal oppressor of the people of God. This theme is introduced with such subtlety that its presence is seldom fully recognized. Though the dominion of evil looms large within the book as a whole, up to this point we have been given only a few veiled hints about its emergence. Not until the interlude between the trumpet and bowl sequences does the scope and character of that kingdom become fully apparent (12:1–15:4).

The second, closely related theme is that of a new exodus. This theme has been woven into the text through recurrent allusions to the biblical account of Israel's captivity in Egypt, "the house of slavery" (Exod 13:3). The first five disasters unleashed by the trumpets are all based on a corresponding plague inflicted upon the Egyptians. The following table shows the main parallels between the two series:

Trumpet Plague	*Egyptian Plague*
"The first angel sounded his trumpet, and *hail* and *fire* mixed with blood was thrown to the earth . . . a third of the *trees* were burned up, and all the *green grass* was burned up" (8:7)	"Moses stretched out his staff toward the sky and Yahweh sent thunder and *hail* and *fire* down upon the earth . . . and the hail struck down every *plant of the field* and shattered every *tree of the field*." (Exod 9:23–25)
The second angel sounded his trumpet . . . a third of the sea became *blood*; and a third of *the creatures living in the sea died* (8:8–9)	[Moses] lifted up his staff and struck the water in the Nile and all the water in the Nile turned to *blood* and *the fish in the Nile died* (Exod 7:20–21)
The third angel sounded his trumpet and a great star . . . fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water . . . a third of the *waters became wormwood* and many people died from the waters (8:12–13)	[Moses] lifted up his staff and struck the water … and *the Nile became foul*, so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile (Exod 7:20–21)
"The fourth angel sounded his trumpet and a third of the sun and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them were *darkened*" (8:12)	Moses stretched out his hand toward the sky and thick *darkness* covered the entire land of Egypt for three days. (Exod 10:22)
The fifth angel sounded his trumpet . . . and smoke rose up from the abyss . . . darkening the sun and the air . . . then out of the smoke came *locusts upon the earth* (9:1–3)	Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt … and when morning came the east wind had brought the locusts. The *locusts … covered the surface of the whole land*, so that the land was black" (Exod 10:13–15)

Though not exact in sequence or in detail, parallels between the exodus plagues and the first five trumpets are sufficiently strong to demonstrate that the linkage is intentional. Here, as often elsewhere in the Bible, the past has been invoked as template for the future. As recast within the apocalyptic framework of Revelation, however, the plagues have been universalized and broadened in scope. Instead of a local struggle between an obscure band of slaves and an Egyptian pharaoh, the conflict now pits the whole created world against the rising powers of hell.

The exodus typology occurs not only here but also, even more prominently, in the sequence of seven bowls, with additional allusions appearing sporadically throughout the book of Revelation (e.g., 15:2–4; 18:4). Clearly this theme is central to John's message. His purpose is to call attention to present circumstances that are in some way analogous to the plight of the Israelites in Egypt long ago. The people of God are in a new situation of bondage and require deliverance once again.

Like the seven seals, the trumpets are grouped in sequences of four and three. The first four trumpets are distinguished by their terseness and overlapping impact. With each successive trumpet, one of the four domains of the natural world—land, sea, fresh waters, sky—is partially destroyed. Collectively, the scope of the calamity thus encompasses all creation. The whole world—and every living thing within it—has come under judgment. In the next three trumpets, the compact form of the initial sequence is abandoned, and the descriptive details are multiplied and elaborated considerably. These trumpets are distinguished from the preceding four disasters by their explicit identification as "woes," indicative of their greater severity.

EXEGESIS

The blare of the first trumpet initiates the series. A massive thunder storm sweeps across the land, pouring down hail and bolts of lightning mixed with blood (8:7). This plague is sometimes interpreted as a natural phenomenon caused by fine red sand mixing with water in a storm cell.[1] But this is to confuse scientific hypothesis with apocalyptic symbolism. The blood pouring down from the skies is a portent of the slaughter to come. The inhabitants of earth have shed the blood of the martyrs (6:10); now the consequences of that deed are returning to earth in a sanguinary torrent.

Set ablaze by the fiery barrage, one-third of the earth is scorched. The fractional destruction of earth and its vegetation indicates that the judgment is preliminary and incomplete. Though severe, the punishment is still limited in scope. This respite gives the inhabitants of earth time to repent. That opportunity will, however, ultimately be rejected (9:20; cf. Exod 7:14; 11:9–10). Humanity is too deeply entrenched in its idolatry to allow a change in spiritual trajectory.

With the second trumpet blast, an enormous flaming mass like a "burning mountain" is hurled into the sea, turning one-third of the waters to blood (8:8). Some commentators have discerned in this plague an oblique allusion to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE, but again, this is to misconstrue John's purpose.[2] As noted earlier, the imagery has been drawn from one of the prophet's favorite sources, the book of *1 Enoch*, which explicitly refers to "seven stars like great burning mountains." As explained by the patriarch's guide, these heavenly luminaries have been imprisoned because they "transgressed the commandment of the Lord" (*1 En* 18:13–16; 21:4–6). What this trumpet heralds, then, is not a volcanic eruption but the descent of a rebellious angel, who has been expelled from heaven.

This event is not, as one might assume from its brevity, a minor incident in a long string of disasters. A major actor in the unfolding eschatological drama has now entered the stage, though his full identity remains concealed for the moment. The same event is described in greater detail in a later vision: "the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (12:9). The same Greek verb *eblēthē* is used to describe both the expulsion of Satan and the fiery plunge of the "burning mountain." The consequences of that ejection are now manifest in the trumpet plagues: "Woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath" (12:12).

When the third trumpet sounds, another enormous burning mass—this time explicitly called a "star"—falls from heaven to earth. Here again, some scholars have attempted to rationalize the imagery by interpreting this plague as a meteorite, but the previous rebuttal still applies: to invoke natural phenomena to explain apocalyptic symbols is to mistake the fundamental character of these ciphers. Angelic beings are occasionally personified as "stars" in the Hebrew Bible (Job 38:7; Judg 5:20; Dan 8:10), an association still active among later Christians and Jews (e.g., Rev 1:20; *T. Sol*. 8.2–11; 18:1–42). Corollary to this idea was a linkage between falling stars and "fallen" angels (*1 En* 86:1–3; 88:1–3; *T. Sol.* 20.14–17; Jude 13; cf. Luke 10:18). The identity of this particular "star" is given only as "Wormwood," a name clearly more metaphorical than traditional (cf. Jer 9:15). Presumably this second star is one of the associate angels evicted with Satan (12:9).[3] The result is essentially the same as with the preceding trumpet, but operative in a different sphere of the cosmos. The first fireball affects the oceans, whereas the second impacts rivers and streams. In both instances, one-third of the waters becomes toxic.

Beyond their immediate significance within this series, the specific way in which the first three trumpet plagues are manifested connects them with the symbolic action which concluded the first septet. Just as the intercessory angel scooped up burning coals from the heavenly altar and hurled them down

upon the earth, so each successive trumpet has brought a fiery judgment from above. These initial plagues thus recapitulate the pattern established by the angel's symbolic action. The vengeance demanded by the martyrs is now being wreaked upon the world.

With the sounding of the fourth trumpet, one third of the sun, stars, and moon are smitten (8:12). The result is not, as might be expected, a proportionate decrease in luminosity, but an intermittent outage, periodically plunging the world into total darkness. The Greek verb *plēssō* "to strike" is emphatic, implying a strong blow. John may have in view a later episode in which a "great red dragon . . . swept away a third of the stars of heaven" with a mighty swipe of its tail (12:4). In that instance, the stricken stars fell to earth, just like the stars of the second and third trumpets. Here the stars, sun, and moon remain in their courses, but shine only part of the time. Common to both episodes is the idea of a devastating blow delivered by demonic forces, affecting one-third of the heavenly luminaries.

The sequence of trumpets is now temporarily suspended, while attention shifts to a bird of prey hovering far above the earth in "mid-heaven"—the highest point in the arc between sunrise and sunset. With a loud shriek, the bird calls out: "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth" (8:13). The threefold repetition of woe corresponds to the three trumpets to come. This time, however, destruction will not fall from the sky, but rise up from the underworld. The target has also changed: instead of the four domains of creation, the fury of the demons will be aimed directly at the inhabitants of earth. The appearance of this ominous sign, just before the slaughter of one third of humankind, may be intended to prefigure the later gathering of "all the birds that fly in mid-heaven" to gorge on the carcasses of the slain at Armageddon (19:17–18).

When the fifth trumpet sounds, yet another star—also fallen from heaven to earth—is given a divine commission. Since this "star" receives a key, John is clearly referring to an angelic being rather than a natural phenomenon. That this angel also belongs to the forces of evil is equally clear from the authorization clause "was given" as well as by the consequences of his act. Like the four horsemen unleashed by the scroll of destiny, this angel has been commissioned to accomplish a specific task of destruction, in this case releasing the armies of hell from their prison.

Using the key given to him, the angel opens the portal to a long shaft leading down to the "abyss," a subterranean chamber ablaze with fire, like "a great furnace."[4] Clouds of dense smoke belch from the opening, blotting out the sun and darkening the sky.

From the resulting gloom, a swarm of fiendish creatures emerges. The horde advances across the land like a vast army arrayed in battle formation. Their scaly exterior looks like heavy armor made of iron. When they fly, they sound like the thunder of horses and chariots rushing into battle.

Though the invading horde has the appearance of locusts, their demonic nature soon becomes evident. Ordinary locusts devour plants but leave humans unharmed. These locusts ignore vegetation and attack people instead. Using their tails as weapons, the locusts sting their victims like scorpions. So intense is the resulting torment that many seek out death, but are unable to find the release of oblivion.

The king and commander of this demonic host is "the angel of the abyss" (9:11). A close analogy to this epithet appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where Belial—an alternative name for Satan—is described as "the angel of the pit, the spirit of destruction [*'ăbaddôn*]" (4Q286 7 ii 7). John, however, deliberately veils the demon's identity by offering only a fragmentary clue to his true character and purpose: "his name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon." In the Hebrew Bible, the word *'ăbaddôn* is used in parallel with Death (Job 28:22), the grave (Ps 88:11), and Sheol or Hades (Job 26:6; Prov 15:11). In most cases, the term has the general meaning of "destruction" or "place of destruction," but it can also refer to destruction personified (i.e., to a specific "destroyer" as in Job 28:22 and the text from Qumran). John clearly understood the word in the latter sense. For the benefit of his Hellenized readers, who would not be familiar with the nuances of Hebrew terminology, the prophet has supplied a Greek equivalent, the word *apollyōn*, which also means "Destroyer." Though his role here is incidental, we will meet this fearsome demon again when he "comes up out of the abyss" to conquer the earth (17:8; 13:1).

As previously noted, the idea of a plague of locusts "covering the face of the land" is derived from the exodus tradition (Exod 10:12–20). This basic picture has been elaborated with various details drawn from the first two chapters of Joel, which served as an important source of thematic material not only for John, but also for early Christian apocalypticism in general (e.g., Acts 2:16–21). In Joel, the locusts are identified as an invading army, which is to attack Zion on "the great and terrifying" day of Yahweh. The warriors in this mighty host have "the appearance of horses, and like war horses they run, with a rumbling as of chariots … they each march in formation, without deviating from their paths … the earth quakes before them, the heavens tremble; the sun and moon are darkened and the stars stop shining" (Joel 2:3–10).

In contrast to his literary sources, John's account strongly emphasizes the human appearance of the locusts. They have "faces like human faces," "hair like women's hair," and wear golden crowns upon their heads (9:7–8). Though the evidence is ambiguous, the locust horde appears to be a subtle caricature of "those who conquer" (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The followers of the risen Christ have been promised that they "shall rule [the nations] with a rod of iron as when earthen pots are smashed in pieces" (2:27). Significantly, the saints have been commissioned for that task using the same authorization formula—*edothē autois exousia* "they were given authority"— invoked to

license the depredations of Death, Hades, and the locust army (2:26; cf. 6:8; 9:3). Like the locusts, which look and sound like "many horses and chariots rushing into battle," the Lamb's followers ride into the fray mounted on white horses (9:7, 9; cf. 19:14). The reward for victory is a crown (9:7; cf. 2:10; 3:11), together with the satisfaction of watching their enemies writhe in torment (9:5; cf. 14:10–11). Also noteworthy is the parallelism between the smoke of incense, which rises up from the altar and conveys the saints' cries for vengeance (8:4), and the consequence of those prayers, made effective through a demonic horde ascending from the abyss on billowing clouds of smoke (9:3). Taken individually, these correspondences are too vague to be meaningful, but their cumulative weight—along with John's known penchant for satire—makes some level of intentionality likely.

When the sixth trumpet sounds, John hears a voice coming from the "golden altar that is before God" (9:13–14). This is the same altar from which the intercessory angel earlier scooped burning coals, which were then hurled onto the earth (8:3–5). The "voice" is not identified, but would presumably belong to that same angel, who now issues a command releasing the waiting forces of death and destruction. The massacre that ensues thus accomplishes the vengeance demanded by the martyred saints.

The basic outline of this woe parallels that of the fifth trumpet. In both cases, a vast demonic horde is released from a place of confinement; the demons are clad in breastplates and sting with their tails; imagery associated with cavalry predominates throughout. This new catastrophe therefore recapitulates the calamity that preceded it, but with an enlarged scope and intensified impact: the invading army is bigger, the demons more terrifying, the consequences more severe.

On this occasion, however, the demonic horde comes not from hell below but from the far side of the Euphrates River. Behind this scenario lies a long and painful history of defeat and subjugation. Most of the invading armies that conquered the Jews—including the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, and the Macedonians—crossed over the Euphrates before descending on Palestine. Consequently, the lands beyond the Euphrates were seen as a source of continuous threat and periodic catastrophe. The river marked the theoretical boundary of Israel, as established during the brief period of empire under David and Solomon (Deut 11:24; 1 Chr 18:3); beyond that dividing line lay the forces of chaos and disruption.

The biblical prophets were acutely aware of this threat and made it a centerpiece of their predictions of imminent disaster: "Behold, waters are rising out of the north; they shall become an overflowing torrent, flooding the land and everything within it" (Jer 47:2); "Yahweh of hosts is mustering an army for battle. They come from a distant land, from the ends of the heavens, Yahweh and the weapons of his wrath, to destroy the whole land" (Isa 13:5);

"Out of the north, evil will break forth on all the inhabitants of the land" (Jer 1:14); "A nation has invaded my land, mighty and without number; its teeth are the teeth of a lion, its fangs those of a lioness" (Joel 1:6). The scenario pictured in the sixth trumpet draws extensively from this inherited reservoir of fear and doom.

The demonic army gathered at the Euphrates is under the command of four angels. Just as Satan is bound and imprisoned in a later episode (20:2–3), these angels have been physically restrained from fulfilling their natural inclination for destruction. Those shackles have now been removed, freeing the angels to lead their hordes across the Euphrates and accomplish their assigned task of mayhem.

The invading army comprises a cavalry force of a "double myriad of myriads," a number reminiscent of the vast host surrounding the heavenly throne, also consisting of "myriads of myriads" (9:16; cf. 5:11; Ps 68:17). Arithmetically, a "myriad" is equivalent to 10,000, so understood literally "a myriad of myriads" would be 100,000,000. As used here, however, the meaning is purely figurative, indicating an indefinite number beyond calculation. This horde is twice that size, and therefore beyond imagining.

The steeds of this eschatological cavalry have heads like a lion and tails like a snake; their mouths spew fire, smoke, and brimstone, disclosing their demonic origin. Galloping across the land, the satanic horde mows down the inhabitants of earth. The riders themselves, however, do not have an active role in the assault; instead it is the steeds that attack the victims, using their mouths and tails. Like the locusts, their tails inflict severe pain, but unlike the locusts, these beasts have the additional power to kill, which lies entirely in their mouths. The rampage continues until one-third of earth's inhabitants are slain.

The trumpet series now moves to its culminating cataclysm. Just before the seventh trumpet blares, the reader is warned: "the second woe has passed; the third woe is coming soon" (11:14). One therefore expects a final catastrophe to cap off the sequence of escalating disasters. The first and second woes brought massive invasions of demons that tortured their victims and killed one-third of the inhabitants of earth. What horror is now to befall humanity?

Yet when the seventh trumpet does sound, what we hear are not renewed cries of anguish but songs of praise and joyful thanksgiving. Our puzzlement further deepens when we hear voices proclaiming "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ." This is hardly the expected outcome of the preceding events. After the sixth trumpet, the world was left in the iron grip of the armies of hell. The survivors of the great slaughter have neither disappeared nor repented (9:20–21). There has been no

intervention from on high, no turn of heart, no universal dispensation. Nothing has changed. How then has the "kingdom of the world" been suddenly transformed into a divine kingdom ruled by God and Christ?

The answer to that question is the obvious one, which is perhaps why it has not been recognized up to now. The seventh trumpet is indeed a "woe," far more devastating than any that have preceded it, for it signals the total triumph of the forces of evil. The demonic hordes have completely subjugated humanity. With all sources of resistance now quelled, no further obstacle remains to the dominion of wickedness. Hell has conquered the earth, and its king has become king over the world, thus fulfilling the prediction of John's angelic guide: "the beast that you saw . . . is about to ascend from the abyss . . . and the inhabitants of the earth . . . will be amazed when they see the beast" (17:8; cf. 13:1–4).

Oblivious to the reality of what has happened, a choir of "loud voices" thunderously hails the arrival of the kingdom of God, which shall last "forever and ever" (11:15). Here, as elsewhere, this acclaim comes from "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (7:9–10; cf. 5:11–13; 19:1). In a reprise of the throne room scene, the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before the "One sitting" and sing a hymn of thanksgiving. Their song is an exultant celebration of victory: the nations rose up in rebellion but now have been soundly thrashed and subdued (11:18a; cf. Pss 2:1–5; 99:1). With order restored and the hierarchy of command firmly established, the rule of God has begun—or so they believe.

That this is no ordinary calamity is indicated by the manner of its arrival. The third woe is said to be "coming soon" [*erchetai tachy*]—the very same language used elsewhere for the advent of the exalted Christ (11:14; cf. 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). That this convergence of terminology is not fortuitous is demonstrated by a similar correspondence between the verb *pareimi*, used to characterize the imminent appearance of the beast (17:8), and the cognate noun *parousia*, regularly invoked by the evangelists to describe the second "coming" of Christ (e.g., Matt 24:27; 1 John 2:28; 2 Thess 2:8–9; 2 Pet 3:12). What John has in view here is a shattering eschatological visitation comparable to the Son of Man "coming with the clouds" (1:7; cf. Matt 16:27; 1 Thess 4:15–17). This event will bring "the mystery of God" to completion, as "announced to his slaves the prophets" (10:7).

The dominion heralded by the seventh trumpet is identical to the culminating kingdom in the sequence of seven symbolized by the heads of the beast (17:9–10). According to John's angelic guide, the seventh king "has not yet come; and when he does come, he must remain only a little while." This prediction is fulfilled by the advent of the Destroyer, king of demons, who

has now "come" (11:14) and has established his earthly kingdom (11:15; 13:2), but who is destined to reign only "a little while" before his defeat and dethronement (12:12; 13:5; 19:20).

Though his scheme is only partially developed and never clearly explained, John apparently subscribed to a version of the eschatological timetable then popular in apocalyptic circles. Two of his primary sources, the books of Daniel and 1 Enoch, contain predictive scenarios which have provided the premises of his own schedule. Based on the explicit interpretation in Daniel (2:27–45; 8:20–22), the seven heads of the beast are to be understood as a succession of empires rather than as individual rulers. The key events and underlying sequence, however, are derived from a pericope in 1 Enoch, which scholars have dubbed the Apocalypse of Weeks. This anonymous prophecy (dated around 170 BCE) divides the course of history into ten "weeks'" or ages, beginning with the birth of the patriarch Enoch. This overarching sequence is in turn divided into two smaller cycles, one of seven weeks looking from the present backwards into the past (1 En 93:1–10) and one of three weeks looking forward into the future (1 En 91:12–16). John has sectioned his apocalyptic scenario along similar lines.

The sixth through tenth epochs in the *Apocalypse of Weeks* are of particular interest because they closely correspond to John's eschatological scheme.[5] According to Enoch's prophecy, during the sixth age "everyone's heart will godlessly forsake wisdom," excepting only an unnamed person who "shall ascend" (cf. Rev 12:5). At the close of the age, "the house of dominion shall be burnt with fire, and the whole race of the chosen root shall be dispersed." The original reference here was to the destruction of the Solomonic temple and the subsequent exile of the Judahites to Babylon, but John would have read this as a prediction of the parallel events of his own time, when the second temple was destroyed by the Romans.

The seventh epoch in Enoch's prophecy brings the rise of "an apostate generation," guilty of countless "deeds of apostasy" (93:9–10; cf. Rev 13:4, 8, 14–15). In apocalyptic thought contemporary to John, the Great Apostasy was a precursor to the end of the age (Matt 24:10–12; 2 Thess 2:1–4; 1 Tim 4:1; Jude 17–19). Thus, for John, the seventh king who "is to come" completes the sequence of seven world empires, thereby bringing the current cycle to a close and ushering in the culminating cycle of three epochs that collectively constitute the millennium.[6] With the arrival of the "kingdom of the world," as heralded by the seventh trumpet, we now stand on the brink of the new age.

That the seventh trumpet represents yet another preview of final judgment is clear from the concluding verses of the elders' hymn: "Now the time has come for judging the dead and rewarding your slaves the prophets and saints and those who fear your name, both the small and the great, and

for destroying those who destroy the earth" (11:18; cf. 20:12; 10:7). Here John looks beyond the terminus of the present age to the subsequent interlude, when the living and the dead will each be judged and repaid in kind for what they have done. The wicked are to be "thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15), whereas "those who conquer" will "eat of the tree of life" (2:7, 11; 22:2).

Based on that promise, the "conquerors" might be inclined to exult in anticipation of a glorious prize; any such expectation would, however, be premature. The last line of the elders' hymn poses a sharp paradox, which once understood, completely inverts its apparent meaning (11:18; cf. Jer 51:25). If one asks, "who has destroyed the earth?" the answer is unambiguous. The ruling elite of heaven are directly responsible for the devastation. Various agents have been commissioned for specific tasks of mayhem, but in every case, the chain of command leads back to the heavenly throne room. The Lamb and his angels have annihilated the earth and therefore must be annihilated in turn, as required by the principle of *lex talionis*. The massive irony of the destroyers proclaiming their own destruction is fully intentional. Here, as often elsewhere in Revelation, John has placed the judgment in the mouths of the guilty.[7]

Though others planned and executed the cosmic holocaust, the saints are by no means absolved of responsibility. Their prayers for vengeance instigated and fueled the destruction of earth. Their continued worship of the Lamb and his God in the face of appalling crimes is compelling proof of passive complicity. Like the beast and his minions, the church bears a heavy burden of guilt that must inevitably result in devastating judgment.

As with all the septets, the trumpet series ends with a theophany (11:19). The temple in heaven opens, revealing the ark of the covenant inside. The presence of God within that holy domain is signaled by "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a massive hailstorm." Even by ancient standards, the picture of the godhead evoked by this scene is extraordinarily crude, only a step removed from a primitive awe of violent natural phenomena. Despite its lack of sophistication, the portrayal is nonetheless entirely in keeping with the main theme of the elders' hymn, which extols the "great power" of God (11:17). No one in heaven or on earth seems to have asked whether that power is being used toward a just and compassionate end. It's high time that we did.

COMMENTARY

What is John trying to tell us here? What is the implicit message for those who have "ears"?

Key to understanding the trumpet septet are the second, third, and fifth trumpets, which all feature falling stars. Most scholars treat these three episodes

as isolated, unrelated events. This exegetical method is by no means unwarranted, for nothing in the text compels the conclusion that they are connected. Each episode has different imagery, a different setting, and different consequences. Yet a threefold repetition of the falling star motif can hardly be a coincidence. Surely we are meant to see some sort of pattern here, especially in light of the subsequent vision where Satan dislodges "a third of the stars of heaven" and hurls them to the earth (12:4).

A number of details connect the "stars" pictured in these three episodes with John's portrait of the exalted Christ. Like the star of the fifth trumpet, the risen Christ possesses the "key" to a compartment of the underworld (9:1; 1:18); also like that star, the newly crowned King has released the host under his authority into the human domain to afflict and terrorize the inhabitants of earth (9:2–10; 6:8). Like the stars of the second and third trumpets, the exalted Christ is fiery with radiance—just as the stars blaze "like a torch" (8:10), so too his own face flames "like the sun shining in its strength" (1:16). Most importantly, the Christ of Revelation explicitly identifies himself as "Morning Star" (22:16). This is a subtle but unmistakable allusion to the following passage from the book of Isaiah:

> How you are fallen from heaven,
> O Morning Star,[8] son of Dawn!
> How you are cut down to the earth,
> you who laid the nations low!
> You said in your heart,
> "I will ascend to the heavens;
> I will raise my throne
> above the stars of God;
> I will sit on the mount of assembly
> on the heights of Mount Zaphon;
> I will ascend to the tops of the clouds,
> I will make myself like the Most High."
> But you are brought down to Sheol,
> to the depths of the abyss.
> Those who see you will stare at you,
> and ponder your fate:
> "Is this the man who made the earth tremble,
> who shook kingdoms,
> who made the world like a desert
> and overthrew its cities,
> who would not let his captives go home?"
> All the kings of the nations lie in state,
> each in his own tomb.
> But you are cast out of your tomb
> like a rejected branch;
> you are covered with the slain,
> with those pierced by the sword,

those who descend to the stones of the pit.
Like a corpse trampled underfoot,
you will not join them in burial,
for you have destroyed your land
and killed your people. (Isa 14:12–19)

This remarkable poem has behind it a long and varied history of interpretation and elaboration. As we now have it, the poem is embedded within an extended taunt against an unnamed "king of Babylon" (Isa 14:3–23). The mythological fragment preserved therein is, however, much older than its present literary context. The "mount of assembly" and the "heights of Mount Zaphon" are well known features of Canaanite myth. Shachar, "the Dawn," was the father of Athtar, the Venus-god, also known as "Morning Star." In the distant background of the taunt, one can discern a mythological episode recounting a failed attempt to usurp the role of El, head of the Canaanite pantheon. As the brightest of all stars in the sky, Athtar became arrogant and sought to elevate his throne "above the stars of God"—i.e., to rule over the rest of the divine luminaries. But his scheme was thwarted; instead Athtar was forced to descend into the "abyss," there to rule over the underworld. In mundane terms, the myth refers to Venus appearing in the early morning sky, only to be eclipsed by the incomparably greater splendor of the rising sun.

Even after it had attained a fixed literary form within the Hebrew Bible, the myth of Morning Star continued to evolve. By the late first century CE, some Jews understood the text as an allusion to the fall of Satan (*2 En* 29:3–4). A variant form of the tradition traced Satan's rebellion to the day of Adam's creation: when God commanded the heavenly host to bow down before the new creature "made in the image of God," Satan refused and was therefore ejected (*Life of Adam and Eve* 12–16; *2 En* 31:4–5). This idea was picked up and further elaborated in the Quran (15.28– 44; 38.71–83). Christians continued to enlarge upon the text well into the Middle Ages. The epithet "Lucifer" is the Latin translation of "Morning Star" in the Vulgate. Because medieval preachers cited this text frequently, the term was eventually adopted as a proper name for the devil.

John has also invoked this line of evolving tradition, but from a decidedly contrarian perspective. Within the book of Revelation, the taunt against the "king of Babylon" is understood as a prophetic premonition of the Antichrist, as manifested in the resuscitated corpse of Jesus, the "firstborn of the dead" (Rev 1:5; Col 1:18). The basis of this identification is ideological, but its scriptural justification is to be found in Morning Star's decreed fate: "you are cast out from your tomb, like a rejected branch" (Isa 14:19). The word "branch" [*nēṣer*] was, of course, commonly invoked as a metaphor for the

Jewish Messiah (Isa 11:1; cf. Jer 23:5). One can see how those already predisposed towards such an interpretation might take this to mean that the corpse that was "cast out" of the tomb was a "rejected branch" or false Christ.

The rest of Isaiah's poem has been interpreted along these same lines. Like Morning Star, the risen Christ has "laid the nations low" (cf. Rev 19:15; 17:14), "made the world like a desert" (cf. Rev 8:7), "shook kingdoms" (cf. Rev 16:18–19; 11:13), "overthrew its cities" (cf. Rev 16:19; 18:16–19), "made the earth tremble" (cf. Rev 6:12–14), and refused to "let his captives go home" (cf. Rev 20:15). Similarly he has ascended to heaven above "the tops of the clouds" (cf. Rev 1:7; 14:14), asserted his rule over all other dominions (cf. Rev 19:16; 1:5), and made himself "like the Most High" (cf. Rev 3:21; 22:1). That downfall and ignominy are likewise his ultimate destiny will become evident as we proceed.

NOTES

1. Originally proposed by H. Swete in his 1907 commentary.
2. E. Pagels, *Revelations*, pp. 20–21; D. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, pp. 519–20.
3. Alternatively—since both the second and third trumpets are based on the same Egyptian plague (Exod 7:20–21)—these could be the same event shown from different angles. The second trumpet plague depicts the effect on salt water; the third trumpet shows the effect on fresh water.
4. Rev 9:2; cf. *1 Enoch* 21:7, which similarly refers to "a narrow cleft [extending] to the abyss, full of great pillars of fire."
5. See L. T. Stuckenbruck, *The Myth of Rebellious Angels*, p. 320.
6. The last three ages in the *Apocalypse of Weeks* are realized in John's eschatological scheme as follows: during the eighth week of history, "sinners will be delivered into the hands of the righteous" who will be given a sword to execute judgment (*1 En* 91:12; cf. Rev19:20–21), afterwards, a temporary kingdom ruled by the righteous will be established (*1 En* 91:13; cf. Rev 20:1–6; *Pistis Sophia* 2.99); during the ninth week "the righteous judgment shall be revealed to the whole world, and all the works of the godless shall vanish from all the earth" (*1 En* 91:14; cf. Rev 20:7–15); in the tenth week "the first heaven shall pass away and vanish, and a new heaven shall appear" (*1 En* 91:16; cf. Rev 21:1–5).
7. For example, Rev 19:3; 14:13.
8. LXX; MT: "Shining One." Here, as generally elsewhere, the version familiar to John would have been the Septuagint.

Chapter Eight

The Rise of the Beast

Up to now, John has provided only vague, sporadic hints about the coming reign of evil. In the following vision, he gives us a detailed picture of its manifest form and scope:

> The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads. On its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, and its feet were like those of a bear, and its mouth was like the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads looked as though it had been slain, but the fatal wound had healed. The whole earth followed the beast in amazement. They worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?"
>
> The beast was given a mouth with which to utter arrogant words and blasphemies, and it was given authority to act for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling place—that is, those who dwell in heaven. It was given power to wage war against the saints and to vanquish them. And it was given authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation; all the inhabitants of earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.
>
> Whoever has ears, let them hear. Those destined for captivity into captivity shall go; he who kills with the sword shall be killed by the sword. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.
>
> Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and it compelled the earth and its inhabitants to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And it performed great signs, even making fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the sight of men. Because of the

> signs which it was authorized to perform in the presence of the beast, it deceived the inhabitants of earth, commanding them to make an image of the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet returned to life. And it was authorized to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refuse to worship the image of the beast to be killed. And it required everyone—both the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves—to be given a mark on the right hand or on the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell, except those who have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom: let those with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. The number is six hundred and sixty-six. (13:1–18)

OVERVIEW

Three primary sources have provided the materials from which this episode has been constructed. The first and by far the most important of these is the book of Daniel. From start to finish, the vision is laden with motifs abstracted from that document and repurposed for John's prophetic aims. The beasts rising from the sea and from the earth, the "mouth" speaking arrogant words, the "image" slavishly worshipped by all humanity, the war against the saints, the desecration of "those who dwell in heaven," the "book of life," and the forty-two months of the beast's reign are all derived from Daniel.

As well as providing the primary motifs, the book of Daniel has also supplied the basic narrative pattern underlying the text.[1] Within Daniel's vision, the "Ancient of Days" commissions his chosen agents—both those of salvation and those of judgment—through a distinctive narrative sequence. That sequence begins with the chosen one coming forward in response to a summons (Dan 7:3, 13); the agent then is given authority to accomplish his assigned task (7:6, 14a), followed by a summary description of the consequences (7:7, 14b). The act of commissioning is in each case indicated by the authorization clause "was given to him" (7:6, 14). This pattern has been picked up and carried over into Revelation, where it frames the principal scenes in the unfolding drama, including the commissioning of both beasts.

John's second source is a vague but widely known tradition that warned of a coming "Antichrist" or "lawless one" who would appear immediately before the end-time (2 Thess 2:3–12; Mark 13:22).[2] Though this prophecy seems to have circulated among churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean region, its specific context and scope are never developed in a systematic way within the New Testament. What we find instead are loosely related fragments that point to the general idea without providing a comprehensive understanding of how the various pieces fit together. Nonetheless, that some such tradition existed is clear from a remark in the first epistle of John: "You have heard that the Antichrist is coming" (2:18). Because his audience is already familiar with the idea of an Antichrist, the

writer feels no need to explain the concept. The mere mention of that antagonist is sufficient to evoke the desired awareness of an impending "final hour."

Vague intimations of a demonic adversary who would lead the rebellious powers in an assault against God's anointed were part of the general fund of apocalyptic ideas that circulated among marginalized Jewish groups during the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. In the writings from Qumran, for example, we hear of an "accursed one," sent by the demon Belial, who would become a "terror" and turn Jerusalem into "a bulwark of godlessness" (4QTest 22–24).

After simmering in the background for many decades, the idea of an anti-messiah came to the forefront during the crises preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Rumors began to circulate that the emperor Gaius planned to erect within the temple a statue of himself in the guise of Zeus.[3] For many Jews and Christians, this threatened violation brought to mind the sacrilege enacted centuries earlier by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes. Daniel's prophecies against the "little horn" were therefore taken up and reapplied to the situation in Jerusalem. Speaking in the name of Jesus, an early Christian prophet warned his listeners: "When you see the abomination of desolation standing where he should not be—let the reader understand—then those in Judea must flee to the mountains" (Mark 13:14).[4] The final eschatological struggle would be initiated by the appearance of "the prince who is to come," an evil ruler who would defile the sanctuary and destroy the holy city (Dan 9:26–27).

Even after the crisis subsided and Jerusalem lay in ruins, the idea of a demonic antagonist persisted and continued to be invoked as a warning. Within the New Testament, the clearest and most developed of these premonitions occurs in the book of 2 Thessalonians, where we are told that the "Day of the Lord" will not arrive until the "the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction." This person will "oppose and exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship, taking his seat in the temple of God and declaring himself to be God" (2 Thess 2:4; cf. Dan 11:36; *Asc. Isa* 4.6–8). Through a display of "power and signs and false wonders," the lawless one would deceive those "who refuse to love the truth" so that they fall into a "powerful delusion, causing them to believe what is false" (2 Thess 2:9–12; cf. Rev 13:13–14).

Similar ideas appear in the *Didache*, which also speaks of a "deceiver of the whole world," who will appear in the guise of the "Son of God." This false Messiah "will perform signs and wonders so that the earth shall be given over into his hands and he shall commit iniquities such as have never been since the world began" (16.3).

This line of thought was taken up and further elaborated in the *Apocalypse of Elijah*, which provides a detailed list of the false "wonders

and signs" that will be performed by the "lawless one" (3.5–13). These miraculous signs specifically include darkening the sun (cf. Rev 6:12; 8:12), making the sun burn brightly (cf. Rev 16:8), turning the moon blood red (cf. Rev 6:12), and causing celestial bodies to fall from the sky (cf. Rev 8:10; 12:4).

John has extracted his demonic arch-foe from this general fund of apocalyptic ideas. Because this stream of tradition was itself strongly influenced by Daniel's vision, it complements and expands the dominant symbols drawn from John's primary source.

Lastly, John has drawn on Jewish mythology, which told of two primordial monsters, Leviathan and Behemoth, the first found in the sea and the second dwelling amid the desert wasteland (Job 40:15–41:34; *1 En* 60:7–10). This source has provided various minor details, such as the multiple heads of the dragon (12:3; cf. Ps 74:14), but its real significance is to invoke the mythic background of the ancient battle between God and the forces of chaos. The monsters that appear from the sea and earth are not something new, but something very old, reviving a primeval struggle active since the beginning of time and inexorably building to a final resolution on the Day of Yahweh (cf. Isa 27:1).

EXEGESIS

The scene opens with Satan, "the serpent of old," standing by the seashore (13:1). Having been expelled from heaven (12:9), God's ancient enemy seeks a new dominion on earth. To implement his evil plan, he summons a hideous monster from the sea. As the monster slowly rises from the depths, each body part is revealed in sequence: first the ten horns, then the seven heads, and then finally a grotesque torso that combines elements of a leopard, a lion, and a bear.

This bizarre apparition is a conglomeration of four distinct beasts that the legendary sage Daniel saw in a dream (Dan 7:1–7). As understood there, the succession of four beasts represented four historical empires: the Babylonian, the Median, the Persian, and the Greek. By combining the four, John has conjured an all-encompassing dominion that fuses previous tyrants into a single manifestation of evil, the epitome and sum total of all oppressive powers.

The seven heads and ten horns of the beast indicate that it is in some sense a replica or extension of the dragon, which also has seven heads and ten horns (12:3). The two differ, however, in that the dragon has seven diadems, one for each head, while the beast has ten diadems, one for each horn. Since the head was an ancient symbol of authority while horns symbolized power, the distinction appears to be based on the differing role of each monster. As the "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4), the dragon is the ultimate source of all earthly authority. Therefore it is he who bestows sovereignty on the

beast (13:2). Bearing a massive array of ten crowned horns, the beast is the active, powerful agent of the dragon's will. Later on, an angelic interpreter informs us that the ten horns represent ten kings (17:12), indicating that this power is exercised specifically in the political realm.

Virtually all scholars interpret this beast as a caricature of the Roman Empire. Since Rome was the dominant political power of the Mediterranean, with "authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation" (13:7), this interpretation undeniably fits the basic picture of worldwide dominion. Nonetheless, looking beyond that superficial correspondence, the standard exegetical framework is unable to coherently account for the specific details of the vision. For example, it does not explain why the beast consistently mimics the Lamb rather than the well-known features of the imperial cult.

For the specific target of John's parody, we need look no farther than the book of Revelation itself. As the "Ruler [*Archōn*] of the kings of earth" (1:5), the exalted Christ wears "many diadems" and bears the title "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:12, 16; cf. 13:1, 7). The diadems identify the wearer as the ultimate source of all political power. It is he who rules over "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9; 7:9). All the kings of earth, including the Roman emperor, are subject to his authority. Here, and nowhere else, is to be found the true "Ruler of this world" (cf. John 12:31, 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 6:12).

The prototype for John's satirical portrait of evil does not derive from Roman political propaganda but from Sethian mythology. Gnostic lore explicitly refers to the demiurge Yaldabaoth as a "beast."[5] As the "Chief *Archōn*," this pseudo-god is said to possess supreme authority over all other "rulers" of the material world.[6] Self-deluded as to his status and vain of his meager accomplishments, Yaldabaoth greedily demands the praise of his creatures.[7] Like the exalted Christ, he has "eyes like flames of fire."[8]

John has already introduced us to this beast. He is none other than the Destroyer, the "angel of the abyss" (9:11), who now reigns over the "kingdom of this world," as heralded by the seventh trumpet (11:15).[9] The present vision builds on that announcement by disclosing the true nature of the eschatological kingdom and its ruler.

The image of a beast rising from the sea evokes a well-established symbolism associating large bodies of water with the forces of chaos. John has coupled this idea with the closely related concept of the underworld, as indicated by parallel descriptions of the beast ascending from the depths of the sea and from the pit of hell (13:1; cf. 11:7; 17:8). Like the sea, the underworld was perceived as a dark and threatening region, inhabited by malicious and unpredictable forces, which could rise up unexpectedly to disrupt the ordered existence of the human domain. Both realms lie hidden beneath the surfaces where humanity lives. John has drawn on this fund of deeply embedded anxieties to color his portrait of emerging evil.

The scene that now follows is an abbreviated parody of the investiture of the Lamb. Just as the exalted Christ received his authority from "the One sitting on the throne"—as symbolized by the transfer of the scroll of destiny (5:7, 12–13)—so too the beast receives "power and a throne and great authority" from the dragon (13:2). In each case, the new regent is granted dominion "over every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (13:7; cf. 5:9; 7:9).

Rather than react with horror and repugnance to the sudden appearance of a seven-headed monster, humanity responds with awe: "the whole world followed the beast in amazement" (13:3; cf. 11:15; Ps 66:3–7). The specific cause of wonderment is the beast's recovery from a fatal wound (13:14). This wound is described in a distinctive way that mirrors the description of the Lamb in the throne room scene. Both the Lamb and the beast appear "as if slain" [*hōs esphagmenēn*] (5:6; 13:3). Likewise, both have miraculously returned from death. Despite his fatal wound, the beast has come back to the "living" [*ezēsen*], the very same terminology used elsewhere to describe the resurrection of Christ and his followers (13:14; 2:8; 20:4). Thus the explanation of an angelic interpreter: "the beast that you saw was and is not and is about to come up out of the abyss" (17:8; cf. 1:4, 18). Like the exalted Christ, the beast lived ("was"), died ("is not"), and has now risen from the dead ("come up out of the abyss").

Astonished by this apparent miracle, all the inhabitants of earth worship the beast (13:4, 8). The specific form of their worship is encapsulated in two closely related questions. The first—"Who is like the Beast?"—draws on a standard liturgical format. In the ancient world, rhetorical questions of this type commonly functioned as an incipit to a hymn of praise, drawing the listener into the litanies that followed.[10] This same format appears frequently in the biblical Psalms, which are largely based on the liturgy of the Jerusalem temple. Thus, for example, in Psalm 71 an unknown singer—presumably a Korahite cantor—asks: "O God, who is like You?" (71:19; cf. Pss 89:8; 113:5; 35:10; Exod 15:11; Isa 44:7). The implied answer, of course, is that no other god is comparable. Yahweh is uniquely powerful and therefore deserves the praises of the congregation (71:22–23).

The second query "Who can wage war against it?" is based on the ideology of holy war. In the early history of Israel, Yahweh was said to march before the tribal militia, striking terror into the enemy, so that "no one will be able to stand against you" (Deut 1:30; 7:24; Josh 1:4–6). Later on, this motif was taken up by the biblical prophets and transformed into an emblematic feature of the day of Yahweh: "Who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?"[11] This rhetorical format was also adopted in the liturgy of the Jerusalem temple, where it functioned, once again, as an invitation to join in praise: "At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, horse and chariot are quelled; you alone are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry?"[12]

The worship of the beast is thus formulated in hymns of praise extolling his incomparability and might. No other god is like him; no power can stand before him. This is not, of course, unlike what we have heard in the heavenly throne room, where similar songs of adulation are continuously lifted up to the Lamb and "the One sitting on the throne" (11:17–18; 19:1–6). One of these—titled "the song of Moses, the slave of God, and the song of the Lamb"—offers a close parallel to the rhetorical questions invoked in praise of the beast:

> Who will not fear you, Lord,
> and glorify your name?
> For you alone are holy. (15:4ab; cf. Ps 86:8–9; Exod 15:11; Jer 10:6–7)

Like the paeans offered up to the beast, this hymn invites us to ponder the uniqueness and dreadful holiness of the deity. Significantly, just as John's vision depicts "all the inhabitants of earth" worshipping the beast, so too, the "song of the Lamb" pictures "all nations" joining in universal worship of their divine King (15:4c; cf. 5:13).

Scholars have generally understood parallels such as these as an attempt on the part of the beast to imitate God.[13] In accordance with this interpretation, the beast's mimicry is said to deceive the inhabitants of earth and lure them into false worship. This is, of course, a reasonable conjecture if one assumes a context within normative Christian theology, but a more plausible explanation would be the obvious one—namely, that the beast and the "King of the nations" are one and the same (15:3; cf. 13:7–8).

The implicit bias of John's parody points toward a specific religious outlook. Biblical claims of divine singularity were a source of particular outrage among gnostic Christians. Yaldabaoth's boast "I am God and there is no other" had proverbial status as a parade example of the unlimited arrogance of the biblical God.[14] Like the two rhetorical questions cited by John, this caricature is derived from a hymn of praise, as implied by its literary context in gnostic scripture, where the boast is uttered in concert with the praise of the heavenly chorus.[15] Similar language appears in several biblical texts: "I am Yahweh, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God,"[16] leaving little doubt as to the ultimate target of the parody. John's satirical paean of incomparability—"Who is like the beast?"—is derived from this same liturgical formula. The resulting picture of the "whole world" singing hymns of praise to the beast is a concise caricature of conventional piety (13:4, 8; cf. Isa 24:14–16). As previously noted, this is a perspective congruent with Sethian Gnosticism.

A second satirical element—the miraculous resurrection of the beast—is based on the same ideological premises. As noted earlier, gnostic Christians vehemently rejected claims that Jesus' corpse returned to life. The material body was a tool of the archons, created as a prison for the soul. For that reason, gnostic teachers asserted that those who "cling to the name of a dead

man, thinking that in this way they will become pure" are in profound error, for "the one that they crucified is the firstborn [of the dead], the abode of demons, the stone vessel [i.e., physical body] in which they live, the man of Elohim [i.e., lackey of the Creator], the man of the cross, who is under the Law."[17] As a purely spiritual being, Christ had no body; he was the "spirit of thought filled with radiant light," wholly distinct from the crucified Jesus. If the corpse of Jesus did rise from the grave, as the proto-orthodox claimed, then this could be interpreted only as a physical manifestation of evil.

At this juncture, John breaks off his narrative momentarily to interject a proverbial saying which at first glance seems irrelevant but in fact is very much to the point. He begins by repeating a simplified version of the preface to each of the seven letters to the churches: "Whoever has an ear, let them hear" (13:9; cf. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). We are about to be told something of significance, the meaning of which requires discernment. Yet the saying itself is rather banal: "Those destined for captivity into captivity shall go; he who kills with the sword shall be killed by the sword" (13:10; cf. 11:18c).[18] This saying is representative of popular wisdom, which in this case concerns the consequences of unjust deeds (cf. Matt 26:52; Gen 9:6). Its prophetic significance lies in the context. The beast and his minions have just been "given authority over "tribe and people and tongue and nation" (13:7; cf. 2:26; 11:15). Everyone within that dominion is destined to be enslaved (13:16–17; cf. 14:1–3), tortured (9:7–11; cf. 14:10), or slaughtered (9:15–18; cf. 19:11–18). What we are being told here is that a full accounting for these crimes will occur in due course. Though retribution may be slow in coming, the murderers will ultimately be repaid in kind, for "their deeds follow with them" (14:13; 22:11–12).

Another beast now appears, this time from the earth (13:11). Unlike the horrifying beast from the sea, this creature has the innocuous appearance of a lamb; his true nature, however, is disclosed by his speech, which thunders like a dragon's roar. Later identified as the "false prophet" (16:13; 19:20), this beast acts as the mouthpiece of the dragon, promulgating the message and deceptive schemes of his master.

Just as the dragon transferred his authority to the beast from the sea, so now "all the authority of the first beast" is given to the beast from the earth (13:12). This authority is to be exercised directly "in his presence," mirroring the rule of the Lamb from his dais beside "my Father on His throne" (3:21). The dominion of the second beast is thus conditional and derivative. His subservient role is indicated by his two horns, in contrast to the enormous power symbolized by ten horns of the first beast.

The primary mission of the false prophet is to induce humanity to worship the first beast who was slain yet miraculously rose from the dead. Toward that end, the second beast produces "great signs." John here takes up a motif associated with the idea of Antichrist, which, as previously noted, was then recurrent in apocalyptic ideology. According to that general expectation, the

"lawless one" would appear just before the consummation of history to deceive the unwary through "signs and false wonders." (2 Thess 2:3–9). Jesus himself was said to have warned that "false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect" (Matt 24:24).[19]

One particular "sign" is mentioned: the false prophet will "make fire come down from heaven to the earth in the sight of men" (13:13). This demonstration of power recalls earlier prophets such as Elijah, who likewise called down fire from heaven (1 Kg. 18:36–39; 2 Kg. 1:10–14). However, more is involved here than simply a contrast with the authentic miracles of John's prophetic predecessors. As we have seen, John has consistently based his parody on parallel episodes depicting the deeds of the Lamb. It is not unreasonable to suppose that he is following the same pattern here as well.

Allusion to "great signs" which occur "in the sight of men" points to a specific eschatological event, which we have already discussed. When the Lamb opened the sixth seal, a series of ominous portents appeared in the heavens: the moon turned blood red, the firmament split in two, and the sun turned black (6:12–14). In addition to these signs, "the stars of the sky fell to the earth," a phenomenon elsewhere equated to a "blazing torch" falling from the heavens (8:10). As witnesses to these dramatic portents, all the inhabitants of earth—"the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free"—respond with awe and terror (6:15–16). Here surely we have the "great signs" through which humanity is to be deceived.

Having attracted a large following through these signs and wonders, the false prophet now commands the inhabitants of earth to make an image of the first beast (13:14). Here John's mockery reaches a new and astonishingly daring pinnacle. To understand why, some familiarity with the literary source of the parody is required. John has abstracted the "image of the beast" from the following episode in Daniel:

> King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, sixty cubits in height and six cubits in breadth. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent for the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. So the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. As they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up, the herald proclaimed aloud, "You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be thrown into a burning fiery furnace." Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every

> kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. (Dan 3:1–7)

Numerous parallels in language and detail connect the "image of gold" as described in Daniel to the "image of the beast" as depicted in Revelation. For example, Nebuchadnezzar's "command" (*legetai*) to worship the golden image finds a close verbal echo in the beast "commanding" (*legōn*) his followers to create an idol (Rev 13:14; Dan 3:4 LXX).[20] The groups who participate in the subsequent worship scene are also similar. Just as "peoples, nations, and men of every language" bow down before the golden image, so too "every tribe and people and tongue" serves the beast and worships his image (Dan 3:3–4; Rev 13:7–8). In each case, those who refuse to worship the image are killed (Dan 3:6; Rev 13:15).

One further detail is crucial to understanding John's parody. As noted elsewhere in the book of Daniel, the Babylonian suzerain Nebuchadnezzar adopted the title "King of kings" (2:37; cf. Ezek 26:7), an honorific signifying his status as supreme overlord. It can hardly be a coincidence that John bestows the same title on the exalted Christ (19:16). Given the recurrent use of Babylon as a symbol of the evil empire, surely we are meant to discern a certain parallel between Nebuchadnezzar's role in initiating and enforcing the worship of the golden image and the Lamb's role within the worship scenes in heaven. Though similar divine titles appear in other Jewish texts, it is likely that John appropriated the designation "King of kings" from Daniel, given his pervasive use of language and motifs drawn from that source. In any case, that he has invoked the epithet consciously, fully aware of the larger implications, is certain.

Before we consider those implications, let's revisit the throne room scene, in particular the highly peculiar description of the deity:

> A throne was set in heaven, with One sitting on the throne. And the One sitting was in appearance like a jasper stone and sardius. (4:2b–3a)

Usually the odd phrasing of this portrayal is understood as a pious circumlocution, a way of avoiding a direct description of the glory of God by invoking the metaphor of iridescent jewels. But deeper reflection inexorably leads to the opposite conclusion: John's description is literally intended. What we are being a shown here is a seated "likeness" [*homoios horasei*] made of precious stones.[21] In short, the "One sitting on the throne" is an idol. The image of the beast is enshrined in heaven itself!

A number of details support this startling conclusion. First, the enthroned figure sits rigidly throughout the eschatological drama, never moving even once. John deliberately calls attention to this odd immobility by repeatedly referring to the deity as the "[One] sitting on the throne" (4:9, 10; 5:13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 21:5). Second, the worship scenes in Revelation closely parallel the worship scene in Daniel's allegory. Like the golden image, the

"One sitting on the throne" is surrounded by a vast crowd, comprised of peoples from every nation and language. Prominent within that assembly are the chief officials of the royal court (Dan 3:3; Rev 4:4). In each case, formal worship is accompanied by stringed instruments and "every kind of music" (Dan 3:5; Rev 5:8–14; 14:2–3; 15:2–4). When cued by the orchestral ensemble, the worshippers "fall down" and prostrate themselves before the image (Dan 3:5–7, 10; Rev 4:9–10; 5:14; 7:10–11; 11:15–16; 19:4).

A key detail brings out the main point of John's parody. We are told that the false prophet "gave breath to the image," so that it "could speak" (13:15). What the image says, specifically, is that "all who refuse to worship the image of the beast are to be killed."

The significance of this detail emerges from the larger portrait of the deity in Revelation. Though otherwise inarticulate, the "One sitting on the throne" breaks his silence twice, once at the beginning and once at the ending of the book (1:8; 21:5–8). In the last of these speeches, the enthroned figure proclaims: "As for the cowardly and the unbelieving and the detestable and murderers and fornicators and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part is to be the lake burning with fire and brimstone" (21:8). In short, all who oppose the reign of God will be destroyed. Significantly, this decree of a fiery death echoes Nebuchadnezzar's command that "whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a furnace of blazing fire" (Dan 3:6). The reason for the immolation of the so-called "liars" now becomes clear: it is they who have refused to worship the image of the beast! From John's perspective, these are the true martyrs.

The unspoken message of this episode is that those possessing "a mind that has wisdom" need not fear the threat of a fiery punishment. Though wrongfully accused by their opponents of being "cowardly," "unbelieving," "fornicators," and "liars",[22] the wise must continue to resist the false God of the idolaters. Just as Daniel's companions Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were divinely protected when thrown into the blazing fire by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3:13–28), so too the gnostic elect will remain unscathed when hurled into "the lake burning with fire and brimstone." Thus John's previous call for "perseverance and faith" (13:10).

That the threat of a fiery divine reprisal was a source of pervasive anxiety in Sethian circles is independently attested by a parallel episode in the *Revelation of Adam*, where the wicked demiurge Saklas casts "fire, sulfur, and asphalt" upon the gnostic elect, who are miraculously saved by three angels who "descend and rescue those people from the fire and wrath" (75.9–28). The reason for this trepidation is not difficult to discern: proto-orthodox church officials had proclaimed that those "who corrupt by wicked doctrine the faith of God…shall go into everlasting fire."[23]

The implications of John's brief parody extend far beyond his controversy with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. What the prophet is saying, in effect,

is that the normative Judeo-Christian concept of God is idolatrous.[24] Obviously the object of false worship is not a physical idol made of gold or stone, as in the early history of Israel (e.g., Exod 32:1–8). This idol is a mental construct fashioned of greed, vengefulness, ignorance, and smug complacency, as amply illustrated by the hymns and prayers offered up by the saints. As with all forms of idolatry, the only possible outcome is suffering and doom.

Having enticed humanity to worship the "image of the beast," the false prophet now requires all persons, regardless of social class, to receive the mark of the beast on the right hand or forehead (13:16; 14:11). The basic idea of such a mark is derived from the ancient practice of tattooing or branding slaves to indicate ownership.[25] In most cases, slaves were owned by wealthy citizens, but it was not uncommon for property rights to be assigned to a god or goddess. Worshippers of Dionysus, for example, were branded with the emblem of an ivy-leaf (*3 Macc*. 2:29–30). The apostle Paul invoked this same idea by referring to his physical scars as "the marks of Jesus branded on my body" (Gal 6:17; cf. 2:20), thereby identifying himself as a "slave" of Christ (Rom 1:1).

As in preceding episodes, the actions of the false prophet mimic the deeds of the Lamb. In the interlude between the sixth and seventh seals, angels placed a mark "on the foreheads of the slaves of our God" (7:3). Later on, the mark is explicitly described as the "name [of the Lamb] and the name of his Father" (14:1; 3:12). This closely corresponds to the mark of the beast, which is also said to be a specific name (13:17). In each case, the mark is a visible sign of ownership.

In addition to indicating to whom the bearer of the mark belongs, this insignia has an economic function: "no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark" (13:17). John here reintroduces the theme of commercial "trade," previously touched upon in the third seal (6:6). The same theme will remerge later in the lament over "Babylon," where it is elaborated in great detail (18:11–19). Clearly this motif is central to John's overall message.

Many scholars surmise that the economic restrictions imposed by the mark allude obscurely to an imperial stamp required on commercial documents or to coins bearing the image of the emperor,[26] but erudite speculation is unnecessary, for John explicitly shows us who is doing the buying and selling. The risen Christ counsels his followers: "I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments that you may clothe yourself" (3:18). The verb "to buy" [*agorazō*] is taken directly from the language of commerce (see 18:11). The same verb is used to describe the Lamb's act of sacrificial redemption: "with your blood you bought for God men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9; 14:3–4). It is not by chance that these same items—"gold," "fine linen," and "human souls"—reappear in the list of goods bought and sold in the markets of the "great city" Babylon (18:12–13).

In the close background of the recurrent theme of "trade," one can discern a trenchant critique of the proto-orthodox doctrine of redemption, which was often expressed in terms of a commercial transaction. The apostle Paul, for example, adjured his followers to keep themselves from sin "for you were bought [*agorazō*] at a price" (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; Gal 4:5). Similar language appears elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 1:18–19; Eph 1:7). Though largely metaphorical in intent, such ideas were anathema to gnostic Christians. Salvation was obtained through knowledge; it could not be bought or sold like a commodity. Equally important, the idea of "purchasing" souls for the kingdom of God carried with it implications of ownership. Slaves were bought by a master; those from the "undominated race" did not have a price.

John now presents us with a puzzle that has preoccupied readers for nearly two millennia: "let those with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. The number is six hundred and sixty-six" (13:18). The basic terms of the puzzle are clear enough. In accordance with the ancient practice of gematria, each letter of the alphabet has an assigned numerical value based on its sequence in the alphabet; this allows the letters in a name to be summed as a specific number, which thereby becomes an esoteric code. Many examples of this type of riddle are known from Greek, Jewish, and gnostic writings.[27]

Perhaps no verse in the Bible has attracted as much rampant speculation as this cryptic reference to the "number of the beast." Many dozens of solutions have been proposed, but no genuinely convincing answer has ever been found and it is unlikely that one ever will. The reasons for this impasse are two: first, we do not know the rules of the game and second, the range of possible solutions is far too large. Did John mean for us to calculate the number from the Greek or from Hebrew? Can one include titles like "Caesar" in calculating the number? Does the name belong to a historical oppressor, a supernatural demon, or a future demagogue?

Rather than pursue a futile task, it is far more fruitful to recognize the generic symbolism of the mark. For John, as for many Jews and Christians, the number seven had special significance as a unit of time (one week), and by extension as a symbol of completeness. On that basis, the number six could be construed as the incomplete and profane, a symbolism also suggested by yet another arithmetical rationale. Based on the number of Israelite tribes and Christian apostles, twelve and its multiples are prominently featured in the layout of New Jerusalem, thereby demonstrating its inherent perfection. Because six is twelve halved, this would again imply an incomplete or imperfect grouping. The three digit number 666 is a negative intensification of that symbolism, perhaps meant to evoke the satanic trio of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (16:13). Undoubtedly the number 666 had a specific application beyond that, but no amount of speculation is likely to solve the mystery. For our purposes, a generic understanding is sufficient.

COMMENTARY

In this vision of rising evil, John adopts his true stance as a prophet of the gnostic opposition. As the spokesperson of a contrarian ideology, his commission is identical to that of the beast: "he was given a mouth with which to speak arrogant words and blasphemies" (13:5). This is an unambiguous allusion to the "little horn" of Daniel's prophecy, which likewise is said to have a "mouth speaking arrogant words" (Dan 7:8 LXX). We have seen that John equates the "little horn" with the voice "like a trumpet" and that this voice initiates both his encounter with the risen Christ (1:10) and the vision of "what must take place after these events" (4:1). Based on these parallels, it follows that Revelation itself comprises the "arrogant words and blasphemies" uttered by the beast. In short, John is the messenger of falsehoods ultimately attributable to Satan!

To construe John in that way is, of course, madness; however, his was a calculated madness predicated on literary method. The book of Revelation is a sustained parody of a world view that John despises and has rejected in full. The result is an inverted symbolic world where black is presented as white and evil as good. Within that tissue of intentional falsehoods, every Christian value and hope has been deliberately perverted.

The resulting inversion is particularly obvious in the way that John portrays the inhabitants of heaven. In scene after scene, Christ and his angels are depicted as sadistic killers who delight in torture and slaughter (e.g., 14:10, 18–20). If that doesn't constitute "blasphemies against God . . . and those who dwell in heaven" (13:6), then it is difficult to imagine what would!

As noted in an earlier discussion, parody and inversion are defining features of Sethian literature. These typifying characteristics are closely related to the peripheral status of the community that produced documents such as the *Secret Book of John*. As a maligned and ostracized minority with no institutional power, the Sethians were relegated to mocking the dominant paradigms of their ecclesiastical foes from the margins of society.

John, who appears to have been a well-known prophet, had fewer constraints and therefore greater freedom of expression. Compared to the body of gnostic texts known to modern scholars, Revelation is unique in its penetrating brilliance and shattering explosiveness; nonetheless, the underlying rhetorical method is essentially the same.

Scholars have long recognized that the two beasts pictured in John's vision are in some sense an imitation or parody of Christ.[28] We have already looked at a number of parallels linking various details of the vision to corresponding descriptions of the risen Christ elsewhere in Revelation. To recapitulate the main lines of convergence: both the exalted Christ and the first beast have been slain (5:6, 9; 13:3) and have risen miraculously from the dead (2:8; 13:14); both are universally worshipped by all humankind

(5:13; 13:8); both wear "many diadems" (19:12; 13:1); both are to "come" in an eschatological visitation (22:12; 17:8; 11:7). Like the second beast, the Christ of Revelation looks like a lamb (5:6; cf. 13:11); has his name written on the foreheads of his followers (14:1; 13:16); buys and sells (3:18; 5:9; 13:17); and produces "great signs" (6:12–13; 13:14). These correspondences are commonly explained away as counterfeit efforts to imitate the "true" Christ. However, parallels between the beasts and the Christ of Revelation are too many, too systematic, and too close to represent mere imitation. The beasts are not *like* Christ; they *are* Christ—or more precisely, they are Christ as celebrated and proclaimed by John's proto-orthodox foes.

The two beasts are loosely based on the two distinct versions of Christ that appear in Revelation. The first of these manifestations is "Morning Star," described as having "feet like burnished bronze," a face "like the sun shining in full strength," and a mouth with a protruding "two-edged sword" (1:12–16). This being appears to John in his first vision (1:10–3:22), disappears from view for a time, then reappears near the end to lead the armies of heaven in battle (19:11–21).

The second version of Christ is the Lamb, described as "standing as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes" (5:6). This manifestation dominates the central part of the book. The Lamb receives his authority from Morning Star in that he appears primarily within a vision generated by words proceeding from the "mouth" of his master (4:1; 13:5).

Each manifestation has a distinct role in the unfolding eschatological drama.[29] Morning Star is the military arm of the satanic kingdom. He is the "King of kings," the overlord of "every tribe and people and tongue and nation," with absolute authority over the political domain. His assigned task is to make war on the saints (13:7) and "smite the nations" (19:15). As noted in an earlier discussion, this parody of Christ is based on a taunt depicting the downfall of the "king of Babylon" (Isa 14:4–21).

The Lamb is the propaganda minister of the evil empire. As the "false prophet," his commission is to deceive the inhabitants of earth with "great signs" and wonders. His ultimate purpose is to seduce the inhabitants of earth into apostasy and enslavement to a false god. This parody is based on the "little horn" as described in Daniel's visions (e.g., Dan 7:25; 11:31–32, 36–39).

Obviously John was not an advocate of conventional Christology. His parodies of Christ are systematic and thorough, touching on all the main points of proto-orthodox doctrine from miracles to resurrection to redemption to divine rule. By the time he is done—and he is not done yet—nothing will remain of the laboriously constructed edifice of Christian doctrine but a heap of smoldering rubble.

John's unqualified rejection was not prompted by skepticism. The prophet was unquestionably a Christian, but his understanding of what that means was so fundamentally opposed to the official doctrines of the church that his only possible recourse was repudiation. The heat and vehemence of his rejection are due to his deep religious commitment. A more nuanced and tolerant view was for him not an option.

That does not, of course, preclude such an option for us today. Our historical circumstances are very different from John's, and while the penetrating insight and explosive power of his prophecies are nothing short of astonishing, we are not bound by his animosities or by his rage. We were not brought to this moment in history merely to perpetuate ancient disputes. Our call is to move beyond the wreckage of the old paradigms to a more comprehensive and inclusive synthesis.

NOTES

1. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 728–29; *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John*, pp. 245–48.
2. See the excursus on this topic in G. Osborne, *Revelation*, pp. 493–95.
3. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.184–85; *Antiquities* 18.257–61; Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 188, 207–8.
4. Use of the masculine participle "standing" (*hestēkota*) in this verse indicates that the "abomination of desolation" is here interpreted as a specific person rather than as an idol, as in earlier tradition.
5. *The Nature of the Rulers* 94.16–17; *On the Origin of the World* 100.23–26; *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 10.7–9; cf. Rev 13.2.
6. *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 10.19–11.7; *On the Origin of the World* 102.11–23; cf. Rev 1:5; 3:14. In Revelation, Christ is called "the Ruler [*archē*] of God's creation," implying a role parallel to that of the demiurge in gnostic myth.
7. *On the Origin of the World* 103.3–14; *The Nature of the Rulers* 95.26–30; cf. Rev 4:8–11; 5:8–14; 13:4.
8. Rev 1:14; 19:12; cf. *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 10.9–11; *Gospel of Judas* 12.5. John has drawn this particular detail from Dan 10:6; however, given the many other parallels between Sethian ideology and the book of Revelation, the correspondence is probably not a coincidence.
9. Rev 9:11; cf. *The Nature of the Rulers* 95.11–13.
10. See the discussion in D. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, pp. 331–32.
11. Mal 3:2; cf. Isa 13:6–8; Nah. 1:6; Rev 6:17.
12. Ps76.6–7; cf. Pss 48:4–8; 46:6–7.
13. For example, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 729.
14. *Secret Book of John*, NHL II 11.18–21, 13.8–13; *The Nature of the Rulers* 86.27–31.
15. *On the Origin of the World* 103.3–19; cf. Job 38:4–7.
16. Isa 45:5; cf. Deut 32:39; Ps 86:10.
17. *Revelation of Peter* 74.13–15; 82.21–26; see also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.24.4.

18. Rev 9:11; cf. *The Nature of the Rulers* 95.11–13. This saying has many textual variants, due to its obscurity and subsequent scribal attempts to make sense of it. Another possible reading, based on Jer 15:2, is "Those [destined] for captivity, into captivity will go; those [destined] to be slain by the sword, by the sword will be slain." Understood in this way, the saying refers to the inevitability of punishment.
19. This motif also appears in gnostic literature. See *The Concept of Our Great Power* 45.1–16.
20. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 710.
21. On the literary source and ideological premises behind this depiction of the deity, see D. Arthur, "Ezekiel's Radical Iconoclasm" (forthcoming).
22. Rev 21:8; cf. 22:15; 2:2, 14, 20–23; 3:9; 2 Pet 2:1–22.
23. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 16.2; cf. 2 Thess 1:7–9.
24. See E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 33.
25. For an in-depth discussion of this practice, see the excursus in D. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, pp. 456–59.
26. For example, E. Pagels, *Revelations*, p. 52; E.S. Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation*, p. 173; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 715–16.
27. For a gnostic example of this type of riddle, see Irenaeus, *Against* Heresies 1.24.7. See also *Sib. Or.* 1:324–29; 1:137–46.
28. See R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, pp. 333, 431–41; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 691; J. Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, p. 155; L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 81–82.
29. Distinctions between the two are not quite so clear-cut as this abbreviated discussion would suggest. Many of the attributes of the first beast are more closely related to those of the Lamb than to those of Morning Star. However, some overlap is to be expected, as both beasts are manifestations of the same underlying reality (i.e., the dragon).

Chapter Nine

The Seven Bowls

With the dragon and his minions now in total control of the earth and its inhabitants, the sequence of judgments moves inexorably towards a devastating climax.

> After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of testimony in heaven was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in linen, clean and bright, with golden sashes across their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power; and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. Then I heard a loud voice from the temple, saying to the seven angels, "Go, pour out the seven bowls of the wrath of God onto the earth."
>
> So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land; and foul, festering sores broke out on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped his image.
>
> The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.
>
> The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of waters, and they became blood. Then I heard the angel of the waters say, "Righteous are your judgments, O Holy One, who are and who were, for they shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" And I heard the altar respond, "Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgments are true and righteous."
>
> The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the sun, and it was allowed to scorch humanity with fire. They were scorched with intense heat; and they blasphemed the name of God who has authority over these plagues, but they did not repent and glorify him.

> The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores; but they did not repent of their deeds.
>
> The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river, the Euphrates; and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east. Then I saw three unclean spirits like frogs coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. These are demonic spirits, who perform signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for battle on the great day of God Almighty. ("Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes on, so as not to go about naked with his shame exposed.") And they gathered the kings together at the place that in Hebrew is called Har-Magedon.
>
> The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!" Then there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake, the like of which had never occurred since humankind was upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the great and gave to her the cup filled with the wine of his fierce wrath. Every island fled away, and the mountains could not be found. From the heavens, huge hailstones, each weighing about one hundred pounds, fell upon humanity, and they cursed God because of the plague of hail, so terrible was that plague. (15:5–16:21)

OVERVIEW

Like the preceding series of seals and trumpets, the seven bowls are divided into smaller sequences of four and three. As before, the first four plagues affect the constituent realms of the ancient cosmos—land, sea, fresh waters, and heavens—signifying once again that the judgment encompasses the whole creation. The emphasis this time, however, is not on the cosmos itself but on the consequences for those who dwell there. The second group of three plagues specifically targets the kingdom of the beast.

The exodus typology, only partially developed in the trumpet series, is now amplified and extended to include the full cycle. Not only does each bowl loosely correspond to an Egyptian plague, but the series as a whole is explicitly described as "the seven plagues" (15:8). Other related details have been introduced to support the typology. For example, in the prologue leading up to the bowl series, we are shown the saints standing on the celestial sea, where they sing the "Song of Moses," thereby recalling Moses' hymn of victory at the Red Sea (15:2–4; cf. Ex 15:1–19). The earthly reaction to the plagues likewise mirrors the exodus event. Just as pharaoh's "heart was hardened" against Yahweh's commands, so too the bowls reinforce humanity's stubborn refusal to repent (16:9, 11: cf. Exod 7:3–5, 13, 22). Though somewhat oblique, these

motifs are meant to evoke the idea of a new exodus. The dramatic events that made Israel into a nation are to be repeated on a cosmological scale at the close of history.

The bowl series is thus a continuation of the themes and literary patterns initiated by the preceding two sequences. Parallels with the seven trumpets are particularly striking, as side-by-side comparison shows:[1]

Trumpets	*Bowls*
The first angel sounded his trumpet, and hail and fire mixed with blood was *thrown to the earth*. (8:7)	The first angel went and *poured out* his bowl on the *earth* (16:2)
The second angel sounded his trumpet, and something like a great mountain burning with fire was *thrown into the sea*. A third of the *sea* became *blood* (8:8)	The second angel *poured out* his bowl *into the sea*, and it became like the *blood* of a corpse (16:3)
The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from heaven onto a third of the *rivers and on the springs of waters* . . . [and they] became wormwood. (8:10–11)	The third angel poured out his bowl into the *rivers and the springs of waters*, and they became blood. (16:4)
The fourth angel sounded his trumpet, and a third of the *sun* and a third of the moon and a third of the stars were struck (8:12)	The fourth angel poured out his bowl upon the *sun*, and it was allowed to scorch humanity with fire. (16:5)
Then the fifth angel sounded his trumpet . . . and the sun and the air were *darkened* by the smoke from the abyss. Then out of the smoke came locusts . . . and the *agony* they inflicted was like that of a scorpion when it stings . . .They have as *king* over them the angel of the abyss (9:1–6, 11)	The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his *kingdom* was plunged into *darkness*. People gnawed their tongues in *agony*. (16:10)
Then the sixth angel sounded his trumpet, and I heard a voice . . . "Release the four angels who are bound at the *great river Euphrates*." . . . The number of mounted troops was two hundred million. (9:13–16)	The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the *great river, the Euphrates*; and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east. Then I saw three unclean spirits . . . go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for battle on the great day of God Almighty. (16:12, 14)

Trumpets	*Bowls*
Then the seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were *loud voices* in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ . . ." Then the *temple* of God in heaven was opened . . . and there were *flashes of lightning*, *rumblings*, *peals of thunder*, an *earthquake* and a *massive hailstorm*. (11:15, 19)	The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the *temple* came a *loud voice* from the throne, saying, "It is done!" Then there were *flashes of lightning* and *sounds and peals of thunder*, and a severe *earthquake* ... From the heavens, *huge hailstones*, each weighing about one hundred pounds, fell upon humanity (16:17–21)

While many similarities are evident, the bowl series is not simply a reprise of the first two cycles. Compared to the preceding afflictions, the bowl plagues are intensified in effect and terminal in outcome. Rather than a partial judgment affecting only a fraction of the world, "every living thing" is now smitten. Where the previous catastrophes killed a quarter or a third of the world's inhabitants, the bowls wreak total annihilation, unrelieved by any restraint. Though all three cycles culminate in final judgment, this time the judgment is full as well as final: "the seven plagues are the last, because in them the wrath of God is completed" (15:1). We have reached the end of the end, the last of the last things.

EXEGESIS

The bowl series begins, as John's visions often do, with an open door—in this case belonging to "the temple of the tent of testimony in heaven." This rather clumsy phrase unites two disparate ideas, that of a heavenly temple and that of the portable shrine that served as Yahweh's abode during Israel's sojourn in the desert (15:5; 21:3; cf. Exod 40:17–38; Num 9:15). In priestly tradition, the "pattern" [*tabnît*] of the tent of testimony was said to have been divinely revealed to Moses (Exod 25:8–9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; cf. Acts 7:44). That same pattern was then replicated in the construction and furbishing of the Solomonic temple (1 Chr 28:19). Accordingly, what John sees is the pre-existing heavenly archetype on which the earthly shrine was based (Heb 8:1–5; 9:23).[2]

From the open door of the sanctuary seven angels emerge, garbed in priestly vestments made of linen cinched with golden belts (15:6). In solemn procession, they come before the divine throne, where one of the living creatures gives each of them a bowl, filled with the wrath of God. Like the four horsemen in the seals cycle, the seven angels are thereby commissioned as agents of destruction, authorized to unleash the horrors of final judgment. John explicitly states, however, that it is ultimately "God who has authority

over these plagues" (16:9). Every member of the heavenly hierarchy—from the intercessory angels to the living creatures to God himself—thus plays an active role in the suffering and devastation that ensues. Where and to whom the responsibility belongs could not be made any clearer.

The "golden bowls" given to the intercessory angels have a historical analogue in the Jerusalem cult, where they were used for drink and incense offerings (2 Chr 4:8). A cultic background is also implied in the specific terminology employed here. The verb *ekcheō* "to pour out" is used in the Septuagint to describe the ceremonial act of pouring sacrificial blood at the base of the altar (Lev 4:7, 18, 30). The commission of the intercessory angels is similarly conceived as a sacramental act. As originally performed, of course, drink offerings were intended to appease the wrath of God rather than to convey it. This twist in meaning is derived from the classical prophets, who took up the idea and gave it the connotation borne here, that of a sort of reverse drink offering, which is not poured out by humanity before God, but by God upon sinful humanity (Jer 7:20; 10:25; Ezek 7:8; 20:8, 13, 21).

An unidentified voice from inside the temple commands the angels to commence their assigned task of cosmic demolition (16:1). Similar announcements by a "loud voice" often appear in Revelation (e.g., 1:10; 5:2; 6:10; 7:2; 8:13). Since the preceding verse states that the "temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God" (15:8), the command to "pour out the seven bowls" is presumably issued by the deity.

The first plague is directed specifically against the followers of the beast. When the bowl is poured out, those who bear "the mark of the beast and worship his image" break out with ulcerous sores (16:2). This would seem to preclude the identification made earlier, equating the Lamb with the beast, for the beast can hardly be expected to maim his own worshippers. But this is indeed the goal of Satan's fiendish scheme. In a subsequent episode, an angel informs John that the beast "will hate the whore [i.e., his own worshippers] and will make her desolate and naked" (17:16; cf. Jer 4:30). The "slaves of God" are to be punished by the very Master whom they serve.

Those who bear the mark do not, of course, think of their stigma as a sign of indenture to the powers of evil. According to their understanding, the mark is the "seal of God," a visible symbol of assured salvation (9:4; 14:1). But here again, John has warned us that the false prophet would deceive those who had received the mark of the beast (19:20; 13:16; cf. Matt 24:4–5, 23–25). The nature of that delusion is not difficult to discern. It derives from the belief that a God who annihilates everyone outside one's own coterie can also be relied upon as a guarantee of personal salvation. Though secure in the conviction that they are divinely protected, the saints bear on their bodies the mark of complicity in the unfolding devastation. So deep is their delusion that even when directly confronted with its consequences, the followers of the beast refuse to repent (16:10–11).

Where the first bowl is directed at a narrowly defined target, the second plague is universal and indiscriminate. When this bowl is poured out, the sea turns to blood, killing all creatures dwelling in that compartment of the natural world (16:3). The underlying imagery has been abstracted from the first Egyptian plague, where the Nile is turned to blood, thereby causing all the fish to die (Exod 7:14–21). Here again, as throughout the bowl series, John has imbued the exodus events with a cosmological dimension.

The third plague extends the catastrophe to yet another quarter, the fresh waters, which also turn to blood. This time the poisoning directly affects humanity, for this segment of the cosmos provides drinking water to the cities and villages clustered along streams and rivers. Noting this, the angel assigned to that domain affirms the appropriateness of the punishment: "Righteous are your judgments, O Holy One, who are and who were, for they shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink." (16:5–6; cf. Isa 49:26). The penalty has been precisely calibrated to match the nature of the crime. What the dwellers of earth did is now being done to them.

A voice from the heavenly altar concurs that the judgment is "true and righteous" (16:7). This is, of course, the very same altar where previously we heard the souls of the martyrs crying out for vengeance (6:9). The altar thus speaks on behalf of the murdered saints at its feet, affirming that their demands for justice have been met. The inhabitants of earth have received "what they deserve"; the blood of the martyrs has been avenged (19:2; cf. 14:20).

It now becomes clear that there is a direct relationship between the "golden bowls full of the wrath of God" and the "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (15:7; 5:8; cf. Ps 141:2). We have already seen that those same prayers were the impetus for the trumpet series (8:3–6). The sequence of judgments begun there is now brought to completion by the seven bowls. The plagues are God's response to the imprecatory prayers of the martyrs. No less than the ruling elite in heaven, the saints are deeply implicated in the suffering induced by the outpouring of divine wrath.

The fourth angel pours out his bowl upon the sun, causing it to flare and sear the inhabitants of earth. The text emphasizes the intensity of the blazing heat with the graphic phrase: "scorched with a great burning" (16:9). Though the sun acts here as an agent of divine judgment, just as in the fourth trumpet, the effect is reversed. Instead of dimming, the sun becomes brighter and hotter, singeing everyone below.

Despite their agony, the earth's inhabitants do not repent and praise God; instead they blaspheme the deity. Most commentators profess dismay at this obstinate refusal. But it is not unreasonable to ask: What have the victims received from this God other than pain? Where is the empathy and enlightened guidance that might make repentance possible? By its very nature,

torture is not an effective tool for spiritual regeneration. The result, at best, is superficial compliance. More importantly, brutality engenders more brutality, initiating a cycle of suffering, resentment, and retaliation that can persist for generations. The intransigence of afflicted humanity is not the real problem here.

When the fifth angel pours out his bowl, the beast's earthly kingdom is plunged into darkness, causing its inhabitants to chew their tongues in agony (16:10). This eschatological event is derived from the ninth Egyptian plague, which blanketed the land in total darkness for three days (Exod 10:21–23). Yet darkness, in and of itself, is not a direct cause of pain. The physical torment of the afflicted is based on a completely different tradition—the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" of those cast into the "outer darkness" (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Pet 2:17). The plague is thus a premonition of the ultimate fate of the damned (20:10, 15).

The specific target of this bowl is the "throne of the beast." The seat of the demonic empire was established by the dragon himself, who granted the beast "his power and his throne and great authority" (13:2). This is not, however, a domain hidden away in a compartment of the underworld. The kingdom of the beast is located in plain sight, having been announced previously by the seventh trumpet: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15; cf. 1:6). The outpoured wrath of God is accordingly directed at the multitudes gathered around the divine throne (7:9–15; 19:1–6). Those responsible for initiating and implementing the plagues are now repaid with punishment in kind.

Based on the exodus typology underlying the bowl series, Christians have invariably assumed that just as the Israelites were divinely protected from the Egyptian plagues, so too they would be spared from the coming wrath. But conventional assumptions are not operative here. In John's upside-down world, the roles of oppressor and oppressed have been reversed. The saints—explicitly characterized as "conquerors"[3]—are not the victims of tyranny but its perpetrators. It is they who have been granted "authority over the nations," and it is they who now smash those nations into pieces "like clay pots" (2:26–27; 5:10). The true analogy, therefore, is not between the saints and the oppressed Israelites, but between the victorious saints and pharaoh. For John, the church has become the new Egypt (11:8), a place of persecution, darkness, and despair.

The next bowl is not itself a plague, but the prelude to final judgment. When the sixth angel pours out his bowl, the waters of the Euphrates River dry up (16:12). With this natural barrier removed, an invading horde floods in from the east. Unlike the invaders of the sixth trumpet, this is not a supernatural host comprised of demonic hybrid creatures, but a human army led by an alliance of kings. Many scholars connect the invaders with the

Parthians, a nation of fearsome warriors bordering the eastern boundary of the Roman Empire.[4] However, the specific details and general context suggest that the idea is based upon conventional apocalyptic scenarios rather than upon a historical army.[5]

Meanwhile another horde is gathering, this time comprised of the combined armies of the "kings of the whole world" (16:14). It is not clear whether the "kings from the east" represent a distinct threat or whether these are marching to join their royal counterparts from other regions, thereby forming one huge army. Some scholars think two independent traditions may lie in the background of the text.[6] This is quite possible, but if so, the various elements have been brought together to achieve a unified effect. The overall picture is one of a global mobilization of troops, massed in preparation for war.

The armies have been mustered for a specific purpose, namely to engage in "battle on the great day of God Almighty." As allusion to the "great day" makes clear, this is no ordinary conflict. The "day of Yahweh" was a prominent feature of classical prophecy, understood as a time of reckoning, when God would personally confront and defeat the forces arrayed against him. According to Zephaniah, this would be "a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry" (1:14–16).

In the dominant version of the tradition, a coalition of kings would march on Jerusalem, only to be met by Yahweh and slaughtered on the surrounding mountains (Ezek 39:1–4; Zech 12:2–4; 14:1–4; cf. Ps 48:4–8). But the idea has another dimension, also present here. The "great day" brings the intrusion of the unexpected, the shock and horror of discovering that it is the elect who are the target of divine fury (Amos 5:18–20, 2:4–16). Though God would be vindicated by this eschatological event, the chosen people would not (Ezek 39:21–24; Isa 5:13–16).

Because this culminating battle is central to their wicked scheme, the dragon and his minions actively solicit armies from every nation. From the mouths of the evil triumvirate emerge "unclean spirits" like frogs, bringing to mind the second Egyptian plague, when vast swarms of amphibians emerged from the Nile (16:13; cf. Exod 8:1–15). These demonic messengers go out to kings throughout the world in order to lure them to the appointed place of judgment, Har-Magedon (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19–23).

The means of accomplishing this task are miraculous "signs" (16:14). As described in the commissioning scene for the second beast, these signs consist of "making fire come down out of heaven" and giving "breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could speak" (13:13–15). Through these astonishing marvels, the beast from the land—now explicitly identified as the "false prophet"— tricks humanity into worshipping the beast from the

sea (13:12). The primary expression of that worship is awe at the first beast's invincibility in war (13:4; cf. 6:15–17). When summoned by their overlord, therefore, the beast's vassal kings gather in anticipation of certain victory and abundant spoil, little realizing that they themselves are the intended victims of the final massacre (19:21; 17:12–14; cf. Ezek 38:2–22). As shall become apparent in due course, the "conquerors" are among those to heed the call.

As many times elsewhere in Revelation, John here interrupts his narrative with a seemingly random remark: "Behold, I am coming as a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes on, so as not to go about naked with his shame exposed" (16:15; cf. 3:3). This saying has two parts: a prophetic exhortation and a beatitude.

The exhortation, which appears in several New Testament texts, is derived from one of Jesus' parables.[7] The version that appears here, however, is deliberately truncated. In its full form, the comparison is to a "thief in the night," thereby bringing out the stealth and unexpectedness of the event. Here the speaker says only that he comes as a thief, thereby imbuing the saying with a sinister undertone. The main point of the thief's coming is no longer to catch the householder unaware, but to steal his most valued possession. For John's audience, this would be the "unfading crown of glory" promised to the faithful (1 Pet 5:4; cf. Rev 2:10; 3:11).

The beatitude that follows adheres more closely to the original intent of the saying, which was to urge the hearer to maintain a state of alertness. Yet here too a subtle threat is implied. In the letter to Laodicea, the risen Christ tells his followers to buy white garments "to cover your shameful nakedness" (3:18); now, however, the situation is reversed, and the reader is warned to "keep his clothes on so as not to go about naked with his shame exposed." Personal modesty is no longer of concern; what is at stake now is the prospect of having one's secret "shame" exposed before the eyes of the whole world (cf. Ezek 16:37; Nah. 3:5).

Instead of being poured onto the earth below, the seventh bowl is thrown into the air, causing a violent outburst of lightning, thunder, loud noises, and earthquake. These are of course, traditional accouterments of theophany (Pss 18:7–15; 144:5–6). Similar paroxysms closed each of the two preceding series (8:5; 11:19), but now the effects are amplified. The earthquake is of an unprecedented magnitude "the like of which had never occurred since humankind was upon the earth." The hailstones that fall from the skies are likewise of stupendous size, each weighing as much as a large child.

Though severe, these disasters are merely symptoms of the larger catastrophe which concludes the series—namely, the total dissolution of the inhabited world. The drastic consequences of the final bowl are manifest in the abrupt disappearance of the geographical pillars of the ancient cosmos:

"every island fled and the mountains were not found" (16:20). Previously these markers of stability were rocked by an earthquake (6:14); now they have vanished altogether. In their absence, the world collapses in a heap of cosmological debris.

Ruination extends beyond the physical universe to include human civilization as well: "the great city was split in three parts and the cities of the nations fell" (16:19). The metropolis "figuratively called Sodom and Egypt" (11:8)—source and symbol of all corruption—is shattered, broken into fragments. The "cup filled with the wine of his fierce wrath," which the "great city" had given to others, is now administered to her in a double dose (16:19; cf. 18:6). The "cities of the nations," who have profited from her trade, also share in her doom.

As at the beginning of the bowl series, so too at its conclusion a "loud voice" speaks from the temple, this time proclaiming "It is done" (16:17). The judgment is complete, marking the end of the old cosmos and most of its former inhabitants. The previous world order has been dismantled, clearing the way for the emergence of the new.

COMMENTARY

What are we to make of this litany of disaster? The vast majority of commentators have concurred with the assessment of the heavenly altar—later reiterated by the elect—that the plagues inflicted on humanity represent a judgment that is "true and righteous" (16:7; 19:2). The following is a small sampling of that consensus: "Not punitive torment but equity and vindication are the motive and goal of God's wrath and punishment"; "God's acts of judging are in accordance with truth and are absolutely just"; "The bowls of judgment . . . are sacramental of God's justice and mediate it."[8] These statements represent the triumph of theology over moral discernment. No amount of rationalizing can conceal the massive cruelty lurking in the background of the bowl plagues. Assertions that God is truth and justice become meaningless when visualized in terms that directly contradict those ideals.

Let us be clear: torture and massacre do not become "righteous" simply because they are perpetrated by God or his angels. Mutilating, burning, and terrorizing the inhabitants of earth until they "gnaw their tongues in agony" is nothing less than a thinly disguised depravity, elevated to holiness through pious assertion. The inexcusable should not be excused, even when committed in the name of God.

To be sure, the punishment meted out by the seven bowls crudely conforms to the ancient idea of justice, which emphasized proportionate recompense. The inhabitants of earth have shed blood; therefore they will be given blood to drink. They have blasphemed God; therefore God will publically expose their secret shame.

Yet it is precisely this kind of moral equation that was supposedly transcended with the establishment of a "new covenant" (Heb 8:6–13; John 1:16– 17). According to the evangelists, grace, rather than strict justice, would now define the relationship between God and the redeemed (Eph 2:8–9; Rom 5:15). Humanity was henceforth to live by a higher ethic, based on compassion (Matt 18:21–35; Luke 10:30–37; 15:11–32). Outward conformity to religious convention would no longer suffice for those who desire the kingdom of God (Matt 23:23–28; Rom 7:6). What was now required is a spiritual transformation, a change of heart and soul (Eph 4:23–24; 2 Cor 5:17; John 3:3).

Judging by the church's ongoing amen to the bowl plagues, it would seem that the old ways of thinking are still very much in place. Those who should have known better did not. But perhaps we have now reached a stage in history where the lesson can be learned and assimilated. Should we continue to falter, catastrophe is indeed the only possible outcome.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive discussion, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 808–12.

2. For a detailed discussion of this topic, see G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 80–88.

3. Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. 21:7. Though often euphemistically translated "he who overcomes," the literal meaning of the phrase *ho nikōn* (or the dative form, *tō nikōnti*) is "conqueror," as 6:2, 11:7, 13:7, and 17:14 make clear.

4. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The* Book *of Revelation*, p. 243; I. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, p. 682.

5. So G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 827–31; S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, p. 408.

6. R. Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 298.

7. Matt 24:42–44; Luke 12:39–40; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; cf. *Gospel of Thomas* 21, 103.

8. E. S. Fiorenza, *Invitation to the Book of Revelation*; R. Mounce, *Revelation*; S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John.*

Chapter Ten

The New Jerusalem

In accordance with normative apocalyptic paradigms, a new perfected world order now emerges from the ruins of the old. The original creation, which had become progressively dilapidated and tainted by sin, has "passed away"; in its place "a new heaven and a new earth" appears (21:1; cf. Isa 65:17–25; 2 Pet 3:10–13). Within that rejuvenated cosmos, the old duality of heaven above and earth below has vanished: "God's dwelling place is now among mortals, and he will dwell among them" (21:3; cf. Ezek 37:26–28). Their longstanding estrangement having ended along with the conditions that fostered antagonism, the divine and the human worlds now merge in a holy union, centered in Jerusalem:

> One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, lofty mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great and high wall with twelve gates, with twelve angels at the gates. Written on the gates were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.
>
> The angel who spoke with me had a golden measuring rod to measure the city, its gates, and its walls. The city is laid out in a square, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod at 12,000 stadia; its length and width and height are equal. Then the angel measured its wall, 144 cubits thick, according to human standards. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the city wall were adorned with every

kind of precious stone. The first was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, agate; the fourth, emerald; the fifth, onyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each gate made of a single pearl. The street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his slaves will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night; they will not need the light of a lamp or of the sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (21:9–22:5)

OVERVIEW

The utopian picture of New Jerusalem presented in this vision is the culmination of a lengthy ideological development, which has continued, in various channels, right up to the present day. Few ideals have persisted so long, metamorphosized so radically, or had so great an impact.

Broadly speaking, the complex of ideas surrounding Jerusalem evolved in three phases.[1] The initial phase was an outgrowth of the city's role as the political, economic, and religious center of the Israelite kingdom. As projected in the propaganda of empire, Jerusalem was the royal seat of God's "anointed," chosen to rule over the surrounding nations, which had been bequeathed as an "inheritance" to Yahweh's adopted son, the king (Pss 2:1–9; 89:19–29). Dynastic claims to divine patronage were enhanced by a religious mythology that situated the Jerusalem temple on the mountain of god, a sacred domain in the "far north," where the divine assembly convened (Ps 48:1–2; cf. Isa 14:13). These were, of course, widespread ideas, associated with many ancient cult centers and certainly not unique to Jerusalem. Nonetheless, as Yahweh progressively became the one and only God, so too Jerusalem became preeminently *the* holy city.

With the gradual decline and eventual destruction of the city and its temple in 587 BCE, Jerusalem's claim to ascendancy became increasingly tenuous in the face of contrary political realities. During this phase,

Jerusalem's status as the "city of the Great King" was gradually pushed from the present into the future. A succession of prophets foresaw a time when the city would be purged of evildoers and sumptuously rebuilt, once again becoming a center of international dominion, pilgrimage, and tribute (Isa 2:2–4; 60:1–14; 62:1–12; Zech 14:9–21). Despite the grandiose imagery associated with that expected reconstitution, the Jerusalem of the future was still conceived as a this-worldly city, firmly rooted in a local political context.

As time went on and the gap between grand expectation and grim reality continued to widen, the concept of Jerusalem became ever more remote and abstract, eventually detaching completely from its physical geography. This tendency is visible in many strands of Jewish thought during the Roman period, but attained its most exuberant flowering in apocalyptic eschatology. Drawing on various mythological archetypes for inspiration, apocalyptic literature painted Jerusalem's coming apotheosis in vivid colors, visualizing the holy city as an idealized place of bliss, which would be "renewed in glory and perfected forever" (*2 Bar*. 32:2–6; *T. Dan* 5:12–13).

An important feature of this phase was the migration of the historical city from earth into heaven. In the Jewish apocalypse *4 Ezra*, an angel advises the seer that "the time will come when the signs which I have foretold will come to pass and the city which now is invisible shall appear" (7:26; 10:41– 44, 49–55; cf. *2 Bar*. 4:2–7). The "city which is now invisible" is the celestial Jerusalem. A similar idea is found in the New Testament, where believers are exhorted to look beyond the "shadow" of outward appearances to see the "heavenly Jerusalem" through the eyes of faith—"the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22; cf. Gal 4:26; Phil 3:20). Having been relocated in heaven, Jerusalem became a religious ideal that would be realized on earth only at the eschaton. It is this reentry into the historical plane that John now witnesses.

EXEGESIS

Falling into an ecstatic trance, the prophet is transported to a distant mountain (21:10). There he sees the heavenly Jerusalem descending from the skies to become the earthly dwelling place of the elect. The historical city—the scene of ongoing strife, corruption, and desolation—has been superseded by its celestial archetype, the other-worldly Jerusalem idealized in the hopes and prayers of the faithful.

The "great, lofty mountain" from which John witnesses this event is more than a viewpoint: this is the site of the city itself (cf. Ezek 40:2; Heb 12:22; *4 Ezra* 13:35–36). As noted earlier, this location is derived from Jeru-

salem's mythic geography. In the hymnody of the temple, Zion was celebrated as "beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth," a place of lush fertility and abundant waters (Pss 48:1–2; 46:4). This complex of ideas was taken up and further elaborated in prophetic eschatology. In the "last days," Zion would "be established as the highest of the mountains" (Isa 2:2); "living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea" (Zech 14:8; Joel 3:18). Of particular relevance is the apocalyptic vision of *1 Enoch*, where the seer is shown the tree of life planted amid "seven great mountains," the tallest of which is to be "the seat on which shall sit the holy and great Lord of glory, the everlasting King, when he shall come and descend to visit the earth with goodness" (*1 En* 24:1–25:6; cf. Zech 8:3). That visitation, long awaited, is realized in the descent of New Jerusalem.

Now universally visible to all humankind, the holy city shimmers with light, "having the glory of God" (21:11). Illumination by this means is one of the wonders of the new age. Because God resides within New Jerusalem, "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb" (21:23; cf. Isa 60:19). All darkness and obscurity have been banished from this sacred realm.

John highlights the intimacy of this new relationship by invoking the metaphor of marriage. The city is "the wife of the Lamb," appearing in splendor as "a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2, 9; 19:7). Translated into architectural terms, the bride's "adornment" consists of precious stones, gold, and pearls, which provide the building materials from which the city has been constructed (21:18–21). The earthly manifestation of the heavenly city thus fulfills earlier prophecies picturing Jerusalem rebuilt with "your foundations laid of sapphire . . . your battlements of rubies, your gates of jewels, and all your walls of precious stones" (Isa 54:11–12; cf. *Tob* 13:16–17).

Having successfully completed his commission to demolish the existing world, one of the bowl plague angels reappears to establish the parameters of its cosmological replacement (21:9, 15–17). Using a golden rod, John's angelic guide measures the external dimensions of the New Jerusalem. The city is 12,000 stadia in each direction. Typically a Greco-Roman stadium was somewhere between 180 to 195 meters in length, meaning that the urban boundary would be approximately 2,400 kilometers in each dimension! In short, the city is of immense size, far eclipsing historical reality—or indeed any metropolis that has ever existed. As measured out by the angel, New Jerusalem would be more or less coextensive with what was then conceived as the inhabited world, manifest as the Roman Empire.

In addition to highlighting its vast size, the city's measurements demonstrate its perfection, harmony, and symmetry. Each architectural element is grouped in a series of twelve (gates, foundation stones) or has a dimension of twelve squared (the thickness of the wall) or twelve multiplied by 1000, signifying great magnitude (length, width, and height of the city). The New Jerusalem thus embodies a numerical symbolism based on its historical foundations, the twelve Israelite tribes and twelve Christian apostles (21:12, 14).

The holy city is "laid out in a square"—literally "four-cornered"—a detail drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple complex, which was to be 500 cubits square (42:15–20; 45:2). In John's vision, however, the dimensions extend vertically as well, making the city a perfect cube, equal in "length and width and height" (21:16). This arrangement duplicates the shape of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple, which was also a cube, twenty cubits in each direction (1 Kgs 6:20). The New Jerusalem therefore has no need for a temple (21:22), because the city itself serves that function. No longer is the "glory of God" to be confined or concealed within a structure made by human hands; now it is to pervade the whole realm of social experience.

The most prominent feature of the eschatological metropolis is its "great and high wall," which serves to separate the domain of the holy from all sources of uncleanness and pollution (21:12, 27; cf. Ezek 42:20). Access is provided by twelve gates, three on each side of the city. The gates themselves are gigantic pearls, each the size of a boulder 76 meters in diameter.[3] This rather curious feature seems to have been an established element of the traditions associated with the heavenly Jerusalem, for it is also mentioned in rabbinical sources.[4]

Having surveyed the architectural wonders of the holy city, John's angelic guide now shows him the greatest marvel of all. A river flows through the center of New Jerusalem, straight down its main thoroughfare. On either side of the river, groves of trees shade its banks. Nourished by the "water of life," the trees produce fruit year around; the leaves on the trees also have healing properties. The city is thus presented as a second Eden, a place of abundance and spiritual refreshment.

Many of the details in this paradisal scene have been drawn from Ezekiel's vision of the restored temple (47:1–12). There the prophet is shown a stream issuing from beneath the threshold of the temple and flowing out to the surrounding territories, transforming the arid region to the east into a fertile valley, with groves of trees and many fish. John has supplemented this scenario with various flourishes drawn from the myth of Eden (Gen 2:8–17). In the Genesis account, we hear of a sacred garden of prolific fertility, containing "every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food," including the "tree of life," forbidden to all mortals. The garden is

watered by a river, which flows out from there to fructify the four quarters of the earth. All this and more is now realized in New Jerusalem.

As usual, John departs from tradition in a number of key details. In Genesis, the ability to confer "life" is confined to a single tree (Gen 3:22–24); in New Jerusalem, in contrast, life-giving properties are attributed both to the "river of the water of life" and to the trees along its banks. Where Genesis locates the origin of the river in Eden and Ezekiel has it well up from beneath the temple, John has the river emerge from "the throne of God and the Lamb" (22:1). The renewed vitality of the world thus flows directly from its divine rulers.

Within this urban paradise, "there will be no more curse" (22:3; cf. Zech 14:11). According to the Genesis story, the disobedience of the primeval pair caused the very earth to be cursed, so that "it shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you" (Gen 3:17–18). As a result of this primordial sin, humanity was banished from the sacred garden, and hardship, suffering, and death entered the world to become our universal fate (Gen 3:19–24). In the New Jerusalem, however, all this will be reversed. Then "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (21:4). Instead of futility and toil, humanity will find abundance and repose.

Best of all, the saints will behold the "face" of God (22:4; cf. 1 Cor 13:12). This is a new privilege, never before extended to mortals. Even Moses was told "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod 33:20). But in New Jerusalem this sight will become routine, a visible marker of the intimate relationship now existing between God and redeemed humanity.

COMMENTARY

Certainly John's vision of paradise regained represents an attractive ideal, one that has deeply colored the hopes of many generations of Christians. What could be better than to dwell eternally in the light of God, continually refreshed by the waters of abundant life?

Yet there are troubling signs that all is not well in this second Eden.

To begin with, consider the dominant symbol of the vision. New Jerusalem is enclosed by a "great and high wall," encrusted with sapphire, emerald, topaz, and other precious stones (21:12–21). The existence of such a barrier suggests that despite its apparent harmony, this is still a world divided, a place where the haves are isolated and shielded from the have-nots. Though its gates are never closed (21:25), not everyone is welcome in New Jerusalem. Those persons who are deemed morally or spiritually "unclean" are permanently disbarred (21:27; 22:15). This, of course, raises the question of what standard will be applied and who gets to decide. Historically, determinations

of this kind have been used by elites to suppress or disenfranchise an underclass. This appears to be the operative principle here as well. Shorn of its lavish symbolism and understood literally, the New Jerusalem is an intimidating fortress laden with a massive hoard of gold and jewels.[5] While the wealthy rulers of the city bask in luxury and security, outside its walls suffering and death still prevail (21:8).

Even for those safe inside this paradisal domain, existence is severely constrained. Though the saints are to "reign forever and ever" as kings in their own right (22:5; 5:10), they will do so as "slaves" of God and the Lamb (22:3). As such, the elect are subject to powers that have repeatedly exhibited a pattern of violence and cruelty. Whatever else one may say of the New Jerusalem, it is not a place where freedom is valued. The price of entry is a sacrificial offering of the mind and soul.

Also noteworthy is the prophet's peculiar choice of metaphors. Surely it is no coincidence that John likens the shimmering radiance of the city to a "precious stone," specifically jasper, the very same jewel to which he previously compared the "appearance" or "likeness" of "the One sitting on the throne" (21:11; 4:3). Could this be another idol "which can neither see nor hear nor walk" (9:20)? Is this a subtle clue that the city itself is an object of false worship?

Finally, a number of ethical questions remain unresolved. We are told that New Jerusalem is clothed in "fine linen, bright and clean," symbolizing the "righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8; cf. 18:16). But is that assertion true? Given the horrifying campaign of slaughter and torture that we have just witnessed, any such claim seems contrary to what John's vision actually shows us. More pertinent to what we have seen is the divine prohibition banning "murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" from entering the city (22:15; 21:27). Based on those criteria, should not all the inhabitants of heaven be excluded?

NOTES

1. J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, p. 154.
2. See, for example, Ezek 8:16; Isa 60:1–3; Num 6:25; Deut 33:2.
3. Assuming that the gates are proportionate to the walls, which are said to be 144 cubits thick (21:17).
4. *Baba Bathra* 75a; *Sanhedrin* 100a.
5. For a discussion regarding the "wealth" imagery associated with New Jerusalem, see R. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven* (Mercer UP, 1998), pp. 39–58, 225–32.

Chapter Eleven

The Great City Babylon

Having looked ahead to the glories to come, we now return to the scene of final judgment. In the following episode, John resumes his indictment against "the great city":

> After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven; he had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his glory. He called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place of demons and a haunt of every unclean spirit, every unclean bird, and every unclean and detestable beast. All the nations have drunk the wine of the wrath of her fornication; the kings of the earth have fornicated with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from her extravagant luxuries."
>
> Then I heard another voice from heaven say, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and share in her plagues, for her sins are piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double dose in the cup she has mixed. As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give to an equal measure of torment and grief. In her heart she boasts, 'I sit enthroned as a queen; I am no widow, and will never see grief.' Therefore in a single day her plagues will overtake her—pestilence and mourning and famine—and she will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her."
>
> When they see the smoke of her burning, the kings of the earth who fornicated with her and shared in her luxury will weep and mourn over her. Standing far off in fear of her torment, they will say, 'Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! In one hour your judgment has come.'
>
> And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes anymore—cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every sort of scented wood and every sort of article made of ivory or costly wood or bronze or iron or marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense

and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep and horses and chariots and slaves and human souls. The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be found again.

The merchants of these wares, who became rich from her, will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn, crying out, 'Alas, alas, the great city, she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been laid waste!'

And every shipmaster and seafarer and sailor—everyone who makes their living from the sea—will stand far off, and will cry out as they see the smoke of her burning, 'What city is like the great city?' They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out 'Alas, alas, the great city, where everyone with ships at sea grew rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been laid waste!' Rejoice over her, O heaven and you saints and apostles and prophets! God has pronounced judgment against her on your behalf.

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, saying "So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, never to be found again. The sound of harpists and minstrels and flutists and trumpeters will not be heard in you again; no craftsman of any trade will ever be found in you again; the sound of a millstone will never be heard in you again; the light of a lamp will never shine in you again; the voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the great men of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. In you was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slaughtered on the earth."

After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and righteous; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged the blood of his slaves on her." And again they shouted, "Hallelujah! Her smoke rises up forever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sits on the throne saying, "Amen. Hallelujah!" And a voice came from the throne, saying, "Praise to our God, all you his slaves, you who fear him, both the small and the great." Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns." (18:1–19:6)

This vision is properly understood as an appendix to the series of bowl plagues. There the destruction of the "great city" was mentioned, but without elaboration. Now a detailed indictment and formal sentencing are provided to support the preceding judgment. Over the course of the mock trial, it soon becomes evident that "Babylon the great" was the primary target of divine wrath all along, as indicated by the city's inclusion in the culminating plague (16:19) and the reappearance of one of the bowl plague angels to expound on the symbolic significance of the "great whore who sits on many waters" (17:1).

EXEGESIS

John's vision presents us with a brief drama comprising four scenes. The first of these is implicitly an open air court, with a trial in progress (18:1–8). Acting as a prosecutor, an angel descends from heaven and in "a mighty voice" proclaims the crimes of the accused. The great city has given the nations "the wine of the wrath of her fornication" to drink, causing them to stagger in intoxicated delirium. This image is drawn from Jeremiah, where Babylon is called a "golden cup in the hand of Yahweh, making all the earth drunk" (51:7; 25:15–27). In short, the city is the direct cause of worldwide delusion, the ultimate source of all corruption—the "mother of whores and of the abominations of the earth" (17:5).

Speaking from heaven, a second voice pronounces the judgment: "Render to her as she herself has rendered" (18:6). In accordance with the principles of ancient jurisprudence, the scope and nature of the penalty must match the crime and thereby negate it. Thus the terms of punishment: as the guilty party previously basked in extreme luxury, therefore she will now experience total loss; as she inflicted "pestilence and mourning and famine" upon others, so too she will now suffer those same afflictions (18:7–8).

The scene of the eschatological drama broadens to include the whole earth, whose inhabitants now react to the judgment of the heavenly assize. The recital of astonished grief that follows is a masterpiece of savage irony, styled as a lament. One by one, the great men of the world mourn the abrupt downfall of the "queen" of the nations. The litany of despair begins with the kings of the earth, who weep over the destruction of their political patroness, with whom they "fornicated" (18:9–10). Shuddering in horror, these monarchs watch from a distance as the city burns, wondering if their own dominions are next. If such a colossus as the "mighty city" could fall, what assurance do they have? Next the "merchants of the earth" take up the cry and bemoan the finality and unexpectedness of the city's destruction (18:11–17a). With the downfall of "she who was clothed in fine linen and purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls," who now will buy the cargoes of luxury goods that fattened their coffers? Finally, those "who make their living from the sea" join in the lament (18:17b-19), pouring dust on their heads and marveling that such unparalleled splendor could vanish so abruptly: "What city is like the great city?"

A "strong angel" now descends, charged with implementing the decree of judgment (18:21–24). In a symbolic action that graphically depicts the ordained punishment, the angel picks up a huge millstone and throws it into the sea, declaring "Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with

violence." This motif has also been drawn from the book of Jeremiah, where the prophet is told to "tie a stone" to a scroll filled with "all the calamity that will come upon Babylon" and throw it into the Euphrates (51:60–64). In each case, the symbolic action makes the words efficacious: "Just so shall Babylon sink down and not rise again."

With the judgment complete, the scene of the vision shifts to heaven, where we hear the sounds of joyous revelry. With a mighty roar like rushing waters, a "great multitude" of saints, prophets, apostles, and angels bellow hymns of praise. In a series of four hallelujahs, the heavenly choir celebrates the vengeance of the martyrs and affirms that God's judgment on the city is "true and righteous" (19:1–6; 18:20).

COMMENTARY

What is the object of this vast outpouring of grief and glee? Given the vehemence of the reaction on earth and in heaven, the metropolis targeted by this vision is obviously no ordinary city. This is a preeminent power, a center of trade and political domination. Babylon has provided the prototype, but the historical city is invoked here strictly as a cipher. The doom of ancient Babylon has established a pattern that will be repeated on a global scale at the close of history.

The obvious and apparently inescapable conclusion—held by the overwhelming majority of scholars—is to identify the "great city Babylon" with Rome. Considered from a distance, it cannot be denied that the large features of the vision do in fact match the overall situation of Rome. Certainly a designation as "the great city that reigns over the kings of earth" would be apt, as would also the general picture of immense wealth and power.

Nonetheless, despite the obvious parallels, when we look more closely at the details, the assumed correspondence falls apart. Let's begin with a small but obvious discrepancy: the "great city" is portrayed as a center of oceanic commerce, where "everyone with ships at sea grew rich through her wealth" (18:19). Rome was not, however, a seaport. To be sure, this caricature would be apt if applied to the commercial activities of the empire as a whole, but the parody seems off-target if strictly limited to Rome itself.

Many other incongruities arise when the standard interpretation is consistently applied to the text. For example, most scholars identify the beast with the Roman Empire and the whore with the city of Rome. Yet John informs us that the beast and his vassals "will hate the whore . . . and burn her up with fire" (17:16), leading to the strange conclusion that the Romans will marshal a coalition against their own capital city, which they will then sack and destroy. While it is remotely conceivable that John foresaw such an event, this would assume a sharp break with prophetic precedent. The usual scenario called for the nations to gather and march against Jerusalem (e.g., Isa 10:5–11; Jer 21:4–7; Ezek 23:22–26; cf. Ps 48:4–8; Rev 20:7–9).

A similar disconnect becomes apparent when the standard interpretation is applied to John's ironical lament over Babylon. As they weep, the "merchants of the earth" cite twenty-nine different commodities that are bought and sold in "the great city" (18:12–13). A vast quantity of ink has been spilled explaining how these goods are related to the economy of Rome, but in fact many have only a tenuous connection with the imperial city.[1] On the other hand, every single item (or a close approximation) is associated with Jerusalem, either through historical trade lists (1 Kgs 5, 10; 2 Chr 1–2, 9), prophetic parodies of the city's "harlotries" (Ezek 16, 23, 27), or catalogues of the various furnishings, supplies, and ornamentation used in the temple (Exod 25–28; 2 Chr 3–4; 1 Kgs 4–6).[2] Most of these same wares are also featured in John's portrait of New Jerusalem and its inhabitants.[3]

The dissonance between "Babylon" and Rome becomes particularly acute when we consider the persons and things that are to vanish from the "great city" (18:22–23). Why have lamps, brides, mills, harpists, flute players, minstrels, trumpeters, and craftsmen been specifically singled out for banishment? While we can safely assume that all these were present in Rome, why have these particular manifestations of hubris been selected for judgment? How are these persons and things especially characteristic of the civic life of "Babylon"?

John has a very specific target in view and it is not Rome. Most of the commercial items listed in the lament, as well as the general themes of trade, fabulous wealth, and intercourse with the kings of the earth, have been drawn from the biblical account of Solomon's reign:

> Solomon sent word to King Huram of Tyre: "Once you dealt with my father David and sent him cedar to build himself a house to live in. I am now about to build a house for the name of Yahweh my God and dedicate it to him for offering fragrant *incense* before him, and for the regular offering of show *bread*, and for burnt offerings [i.e., *cattle* and *sheep*]. … So now send me an artisan skilled to work in *gold*, *silver*, *bronze*, and *iron*, and in *purple*, *crimson*, and *blue* fabrics, trained also in engraving, to join the *skilled workers* who are with me in Judah and Jerusalem, whom my father David provided. Send me also *cedar*, *cypress*, and *algum* timber from Lebanon … I will provide for your servants, the woodsmen who cut the timber, twenty thousand cors of crushed *wheat*, twenty thousand cors of barley, twenty thousand baths of *wine*, and twenty thousand baths of *oil* … Solomon conscripted the descendants of those people remaining in the land whom the Israelites had not destroyed to serve as *slave* labor … Huram sent him ships commanded by his own men, *sailors who knew the sea*. These, with Solomon's men, sailed to Ophir and brought back four hundred and fifty talents of *gold*, which they delivered to King Solomon. … When the queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, she came to Jerusalem … she gave the king 120 talents of *gold*, large quantities of *spices*, and *precious stones*. There had never been such *spices* as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon. … The weight of *gold* that came to Solomon in one

> year was six hundred sixty-six talents of *gold*, besides that which the *traders and merchants* brought; and all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the land brought *gold* and *silver* to Solomon … once every three years the *ships* of Tarshish would come bringing *gold*, *silver*, *ivory*, apes, and peacocks. … All the *kings of the earth* sought the presence of Solomon … every one of them brought a present, objects of *silver* and *gold*, *garments*, weaponry, *spices*, *horses*, and mules, so much year by year. Solomon had four thousand stalls for *horses* and *chariots*. … He ruled over all the kings from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, and to the border of Egypt. The king made *silver* as common in Jerusalem as stone, and *cedar* as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah. *Horses* were imported for Solomon from Egypt and from all lands. (2 Chr 2:3–16; 8:18–9:28)

Not only does the biblical narrative emphasize—to the point of exaggeration—the vast scope and glory of Solomon's dominion, but it also extols his extensive trade network and immense wealth. Of particular significance is the explicit mention of "traders and merchants," "the kings of the earth," and "sailors who knew the sea"—the very same three groups that wail over the fall of the great city in John's satirical lament (18:9, 15, 17).

Though the historical account of Solomon's commercial empire has provided the primary materials from which John constructed his trenchant satire, some supporting details have been drawn from cult traditions depicting the establishment of the tent of testimony and its later successor, the temple in Jerusalem. According to the detailed information given in those narratives, the curtains that partitioned the temple were woven of *purple, crimson, and blue fabric* (2 Chr 3:14; Exod 26:31); the altar, molten sea, and doors were made of *bronze* (2 Chr 4:1–9); the walls of the temple were overlaid with *pure gold* (2 Chr 3:4–6); *costly wood* of various kinds was incorporated in the furnishings (Exod 25:10, 23); the temple's beams and planks were made of *scented wood* (1 Kgs 5:8–10; 6:9–10); the central hall and priestly ephod were both ornamented with *precious stones* (2 Chr 3:6; Exod 28:15–21); the vestments worn by the high priest were made of *fine linen* (Exod 39:27–29); *sheep* and *cattle* were sacrificed for burnt offerings (Exod 20:24; 29:15–18; Lev 22:18– 19); *olive oil* and *fine flour* were mixed for grain offerings (Lev 2:1–10); various *spices*, including *cinnamon*, were included in sacred anointing oils (Exod 30:23–33); *frankincense* was incorporated in the holy *incense* reserved exclusively for temple use (Exod 30:34–38).

In addition to the aforementioned historical records and cult traditions, John drew extensively from the book of Ezekiel, in particular the prophet's satirical lament over Tyre. That source has provided the basic template and many details of the judgment scene now before us. Thus, like his prophetic predecessor, John has deployed a funeral dirge as a vehicle for cutting irony (Rev 18:9–19; cf. Ezek 27:32–36). Many other motifs from that same source

have also been incorporated, such as the anguished reaction of onlookers (Rev 18:11, 15–19; Ezek 27:29–36) and the silencing of harps and joyful song (Rev 18:22; Ezek 26:13).

Not only does John's lament over Babylon draw on Ezekiel's oracle for its literary format, but the two satires also share the same underlying intent and ultimate target. Ezekiel's lament has no more to do with Tyre than does John's with the historical Babylon. Ezekiel—a renown "parablemonger" (20:49; 17:2–10; 24:3–13)—invoked "Tyre" as a cipher for the Jerusalem temple, thereby creating a devastating parody of the sanctuary, its cultic paraphernalia, and divine occupant.[4] John has taken up that trenchant satire and elaborated it further, with similar effect.

The book of Ezekiel has also provided the central metaphor and specific terms of punishment invoked in John's trial scene. In a series of scathing discourses, Ezekiel characterized Jerusalem as a wanton whore—an image which John has taken up and reapplied to "the great city" (Ezek 16:15–41; 23:11–30; cf. Rev 17:1–18). Just as Jerusalem had "multiplied her harlotries" with emissaries from Egypt and Mesopotamia (Ezek 23:12–21), so too "Babylon" has fornicated with all "the kings of the earth" (Rev 18:3; 17:5, 15). Therefore the decreed punishment, shown in parallel in the following table:

"Babylon"	*Jerusalem (Ezek 23)*	*Jerusalem (Ezek 16)*
The ten horns that you saw are ten kings . . . these have one purpose and they will give their power and authority to the beast (Rev 17:12–13)	I will rouse your lovers against you and bring them against you from every side—the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, the men of Pekod and Shoa and Koa, and all the Assyrians (23:22–24)	I will gather all the lovers with whom you have consorted . . . and I will deliver you into their hands (16:37, 39)
The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the harlot (Rev 17:16)	they will deal with you in hatred (23:29)	I have given you over to the lust of those who hate you (16:27)
They will make her desolate and naked (Rev 17:16)	They will strip you of your clothes and take away your fine jewelry . . . and leave you naked and bare (23:26, 29)	They will tear down your shrines, demolish your high places, strip you of your clothes, take away your jewels, and leave you naked and bare (16:39)
they will burn her up with fire (Rev 17:16; 18:8–9)	they will burn your houses with fire (23:47)	they will burn your houses with fire (16:41)

Clearly Jerusalem has provided the basic model for John's portrait of "Babylon the great"; the historical city is not, however, his real target. At the time he wrote, Jerusalem lay in ruins. Judgment against that city had already been executed. In the intervening decades, however, another Jerusalem—more ethereal but no less potent as a symbol—had arisen to take its place. This was the "Jerusalem above," the celestial city of God and the focus of hope and longing among Jews and Christians alike (*Tob* 13:9–18; Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22).

That John's target is in fact the heavenly Jerusalem becomes evident when we consider the nature of the city's offenses. In his indictment against "Babylon the great," the angelic prosecutor lists four transgressions: ritual uncleanness; intoxicating the nations with "the wine of the wrath of her fornication"; committing immoral acts with the kings of the earth; and enriching the merchants of earth through the purchase of "extravagant luxuries" (18:2–3; cf. 17:1–2). All four of these charges are directly applicable to New Jerusalem.

The first infraction is ritual impurity: Babylon has become "the haunt of every unclean and detestable beast" (18:2). This indictment has in view the iconography of the Jerusalem cult. According to the account in 1 Kings, two large gilded statues of cherubim were located in the inner sanctuary of the Solomonic temple, their outstretched wings spanning the chamber from one wall to the other (1 Kgs 6:23–28). The doors, lintels, and walls throughout the temple complex were decorated with carved cherubim, flowers, and palm trees (1 Kgs 6:29–35; cf. Ezek 41:18–25). The intended effect was to evoke the lush groves and exotic mythical creatures of paradise—now relocated to the celestial throne room, as reimagined in John's vision. However, based on the express stipulations of the purity code, these "living creatures" would be judged *bəhēmāh šeqeṣ* "loathsome beasts," and as such, incompatible with the realm of holiness (Lev 11:43–45; 20:25–26; Deut 4:15–18; cf. Ezek 8:10). Not only do two of the creatures have faces belonging to unclean creatures (Lev 11:13, 27), but all four are hybrids, combining the features of two or more distinct animal categories—an amalgam that runs counter to the very concept of "purity" (Lev 19:19; Deut 22:9–11). In John's eyes, their presence in New Jerusalem is manifest proof of its defiled state.

The second transgression—intoxicating the nations with the wine of wrath—would also apply to the heavenly Jerusalem, for it was her emissaries who reaped "the vine of the earth" and trod "the great wine press of the wrath of God" (14:17–20; 19:15). Intercessory angels from the heavenly temple subsequently poured out the "golden bowls full of the wrath of God" upon the earth, spreading havoc and mass delusion among its inhabitants (15:5–16:21). Therefore the terms of punishment: the holy city is

to drink from "the cup she has mixed" (18:6). Just as she inflicted plagues upon the earth and its inhabitants, so too "her plagues will overtake her" (18:8).

The third crime—fornication with the kings of earth—also has clear relevance to New Jerusalem. John explicitly tells us that "the kings of the earth will bring their glory into her [the city]" (21:24). The sexual connotations of this procession are obvious. Even after the arrival of the eschaton, the holy city will have intercourse with the very same kings who were previously allied with the beast (19:19; 16:14). In mundane terms, the "glory" brought by these vassals would be a tribute of gold and other valuable goods destined for their overlord, the "Ruler of the kings of the earth" (cf. Isa 60:5–14; Ps 72:8–11).

The fourth crime—enriching the merchants of earth by purchasing "extravagant luxuries"—likewise has obvious relevance to New Jerusalem. The city is adorned with jewels and swathed in expensive fabrics (21:18–21; 19:8). So great is her wealth that even her streets are made of "pure gold" (21:21). Accordingly, her punishment is to be stripped naked by the same kings with whom she has fornicated (17:16; cf. Ezek 16:35–42; 23:22–26).

To the formal indictment listing Babylon's crimes, the heavenly judge adds the personal sin of hubris—specifically, self glorification, living shamelessly in luxury, and boasting of her royal status (18:7). Here again, these transgressions are all directly applicable to New Jerusalem. The verb "glorify" [*doxazō*] is derived from the root word used to characterize the "glory" [*doxa*] emanating from the city as it comes down from heaven (21:10–11). The indictment thus cleverly insinuates that Jerusalem's radiance emanates not from the light of God but from the flush of false pride.

A similar satirical caricature underlies the boast: "I sit enthroned as a queen." John alludes here to an exilic prophecy against the historical Babylon, which attributes a similar claim to the "daughter of the Chaldeans," subsequently proven false by her downfall (Isa 47:5–11). However, it does not take much imagination to see a parallel with the status of New Jerusalem following her eschatological marriage to the "King of kings" (21:2; 19:7). The would-be queen's assertion "I am no widow" echoes the assurance that the Lamb and his followers "shall reign forever and ever" (22:5; 5:10; cf. Lam 1:1–2). That the city would never mourn is explicit in the promise: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, and there will be no more mourning or crying or pain" (21:4; 7:17).

The consequences of the ensuing judgment likewise point to Jerusalem rather than to Rome. The "craftsmen" who are to disappear from the great city (18:22) subtly allude to the "skilled workers" who designed and built the furnishings used in the temple (2 Chr 2:7, 13–14; 4:11–16). The "lamp" that will no longer shine in Babylon refers to the gold lamps outside the Holy of Holies

(2 Chr 4:20; Exod 25:37) as well as to their heavenly prototype, the "seven lamps of fire burning before the throne" of God (4:5; cf. 21:23). The "sound of harpists and minstrels and flutists and trumpeters" that is to be silenced would apply to the angelic trumpeters, harp-playing elders, and saintly choir performing throughout the heavenly Jerusalem (5:8–14; 8:6ff.; 14:2–3). That "the voice of the bridegroom and bride" will also cease is a detail drawn from Jeremiah's prophecy against Jerusalem (25:10; 16:9), but with obvious relevance to the marriage of the Lamb and his bride (19:7–9). Finally, that the city would be deprived of the "fruit that you longed for" (18:14) is a veiled allusion to the sacred grove in New Jerusalem, which is to bear "twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month" (22:2; cf. 2:7; *1 En* 25:4–5). It would seem that the inhabitants of the holy city will be deprived not only of joy and music but also of eternal life.

Other narrative details lend further support to this overall conclusion. We are told, for example, that Babylon "sits on many waters" (17:1), a metaphor drawn from that city's location next to the Euphrates River, surrounded by a network of canals. It is rather difficult to see how this image would apply to Rome, but its relevance to New Jerusalem is obvious: "the river of the water of life" wells up from beneath the divine throne, then flows through the middle of the city (22:1–2; cf. Ezek 47:1–12).

The parallel extends beyond the literal to include the symbolic. An angel explains to John that "the waters that you saw where the whore sits" signify "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" (17:15). This too has obvious relevance to the Lamb's earthly kingdom, comprised of believers "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9; 7:9; cf. 13:7). It is hardly a coincidence that John twice likens the roar of the celestial choir to the "sound of many waters" (14:2; 19:6).

An allusion to Jerusalem can also be discerned in the seafarers' anguished query: 'What city is like the great city?' (18:18; cf. Jer 22:8; Lam 2:15). This rhetorical question is reminiscent of humanity's amazed reaction to the monster from the abyss: "Who is like the beast?" (13:4). Here again, John appears to be making an ironical allusion to the liturgy of the temple. Biblical psalms frequently extol the wondrous glories of Jerusalem (Pss 87:3; 50:2; 48:12–13). Especially pertinent are paeans to the impregnable "city of the Great King," where God "has shown himself to be her fortress" (Pss 48:2–3; 46:4–7). This would account for the horrified astonishment of the kings of the earth at the sudden downfall of the "mighty city" (18:10). The very gates of heaven have collapsed!

Not only the individual details, but also the very structure of Revelation tends toward a convergence of identity. Though superficially distinct, the visions picturing the contrasting destinies of the "whore" and the "bride" have parallel beginnings and shared motifs, as shown in the following table.

The Whore	*The Bride*
Then *one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls* came and said to me, "*Come, I will show you* the judgment of the great whore who is seated on many waters . . .	Then *one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls* full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "*Come, I will show you* the bride, the wife of the Lamb."
So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous *names* . . .	So he *carried me away in the spirit* to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. … On the gates were written the *names* of the twelve tribes of Israel. … The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the *names* of the twelve apostles of the Lamb …
The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and glittering with *gold* and *jewels* and *pearls*. (17:1–4)	The foundation stones of the city wall were adorned with every kind of *precious stone* … and the twelve gates were twelve *pearls* … and the street of the city was pure *gold* (21:9–12, 19–21)

Even a cursory comparison reveals many similarities between the two visions.[5] Both are mediated by one of the bowl plague angels; in each instance, the angel invites John to accompany him with the words "Come I will show you …"; both times, John is carried off in the spirit to a remote location where he sees a woman; in each case, the woman is adorned with gold and jewels. There are, of course, notable differences between the two visions as well—for example, the scene of one is a "great, high mountain" and that of the other is a desert wilderness. Nonetheless, the parallel structure and phraseology is clearly designed to highlight the correspondences between the two scenarios.

Virtually all commentators have assumed that the two women are being deliberately contrasted rather than insidiously compared. But just as with the parallels between the two beasts and the risen Christ, the correspondences between Babylon and New Jerusalem are too many and too close for that to be an adequate explanation. Here again, the convergence goes beyond similarity to attain identity. The "bride" is the holy city as seen through the eyes of salvation; the "whore" is Jerusalem seen through the eyes of judgment. Each perspective is a facet of the same underlying reality.

The real point of the parallelism becomes evident in the sequel to the city's downfall (19:1–6). As Babylon burns, the elect rejoice from afar and

affirm that the judgment is "true and righteous," little realizing that they have just agreed to the terms of their own punishment. What the saints have witnessed is not the doom of some despicable "whore," but a mirror to their own destiny.

John here draws on one of the oldest and most devastating weapons in the prophetic arsenal. The same rhetorical strategy was used by Amos (1:3–2:8), Ezekiel (27:1–36), and most famously by the court prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1–12). The rhetorical method is simple but brutally effective. The prophet begins by painting an exaggerated portrait of some person, group, or nation which has blatantly violated a universal ethical norm. Once the moral outrage of the audience has been aroused, the prophet then implicitly invites the listeners to pronounce judgment. Sure of their own righteousness, the audience joins in the chorus of condemnation. But then comes the shattering riposte: "*you* are that man!" (2 Sam 12:7). Those who passed judgment are themselves the true culprits of the hypothetical scenario.

Contrary to what the church has long assumed, the target of divine wrath is not Rome or secular society or the papacy or any other of the various groups that have been identified with Babylon over the past two millennia. The whore is not "them"—she is us.

NOTES

1. See I. Provan, "Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 64 (1996), pp. 81–100; A. Beagley, *The Sitz im Leben of the Apocalypse* (de Gruyter, 1987), pp. 95–100.

2. Though the majority of the goods in John's inventory have been drawn from various sources in the Hebrew Bible, in a few instances John has supplemented the list with commodities that directly pertain to Jerusalem during the Roman period. For example, the Herodian temple was renowned for its distinctive mosaic floors made of imported multicolor *marble* tiles (cf. 18:12). See Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.192–93; *Baba Bathra* 4a; also D. Ponchner, "Archeologists Restore-Flooring that Adorned the Second Temple of Jerusalem," *Scientific American*, Sept. 2016.

3. For example: gold (21:18; 3:18); precious stones (21:19; 4:3); pearls (21:21); fine linen (19:8, 14); scarlet (19:13); bronze (1:15); iron (2:27; 19:15); incense (5:8; 8:4); wine (14:10); olive oil (6:6); wheat (6:6); cattle (4:7); horses (19:14); slaves (7:3; 19:5); human souls (5:9).

4. See D. Arthur, "Satire and Subversion in the Oracles of Ezekiel" *VT* 74 (2024): 486–510; idem, *A Smooth Stone*, pp. 211–32.

5. For a detailed side-by-side comparison, see D. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, pp. 1144–46.

Chapter Twelve

The Celestial Woman

The starring roles in John's eschatological drama have been assigned to the bride and her alter ego, the whore. A third woman, however, also has a central part to play. In the following episode, John introduces us to yet another symbolic female figure:

> A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and cried out in her distress, in the agony of giving birth.
>
> Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars from heaven and flung them to the earth. Then the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.
>
> She gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. Her child was snatched up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she will be sustained for one thousand two hundred sixty days. … When the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who gave birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness to the place where she would be nourished for a time and times and half a time. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed a torrent of water after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. (12:1–6, 13–17)

OVERVIEW

This brief but vivid narrative provides crucial clues to John's social context and religious stance, for the woman depicted here—and not New Jerusalem—represents for him the true people of salvation. Like the bride and the whore, this third woman is a corporate symbol; however, her circumstances and character differ greatly from those of the other two females. Though she wears a crown, she is neither wealthy nor powerful. Instead she dwells on the margins, far from the locus of glory, riches, and political authority. Clearly this is not a cipher for the church triumphant, secure in its possession of the Kingdom. The woman symbolizes a persecuted community repeatedly assailed by the forces of evil. With its very existence under threat, the group has retreated from the public sphere.

All this suggests that the narrative concerns a conventicle of some kind. But before we consider the identity and social location of that group, let's review the main themes of the story itself.

EXEGESIS

The episode begins with a portent in the heavens. A woman appears in the skies, her feet straddling the moon, a crown of stars upon her head, her body swathed in the radiance of the sun (12:1). The twelve stars encircling the woman's head are reminiscent of the twelve constellations of the zodiac; taken together with her manifestation as a "great sign," this would suggest an astrological background to John's imagery. Jewish writings from this period do, in fact, sometimes contain speculation of that kind,[1] and later midrashes explicitly associate the twelve signs of the zodiac with the twelve tribes of Israel.[2] Very likely similar ideas underlie the figure presented here, but these are not developed in a systematic way and do not appear to be fundamental to the episode.

The celestial woman is pregnant and cries out in the "agony of giving birth" (12:2). The narrative alludes here to the eschatological woes leading up to the appearance of the Messiah and the subsequent establishment of the kingdom of God (Mark 13:8). The underlying concept is derived from postexilic prophecies in which the period of bondage in Babylon is likened to the travail of childbirth: "As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in pain, so were we" (Isa 26:17–18; 66:7–8; Mic. 4:10). As developed in later apocalyptic writings, this period of anguish became a metaphor for the struggles and suffering of the messianic community as it strove to bring forth the new age.

This ideological background is evident from the way the newborn infant is described. The woman gives birth to a male child, who ascends to a waiting throne in heaven, there to "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (12:5).

This motif is derived from the ancient ceremony of royal investiture, during which Yahweh (or a priestly proxy) commanded the Israelite king to "sit at my right hand" and take up "your mighty scepter," thereby asserting dominion over his vassals (Pss 110:1–2; 2:6–9; cf. Rev 19:15). At the time John wrote, the Israelite empire was, of course, a distant memory, with no vestiges remaining. Nonetheless, many Jews still clung to Yahweh's promise that David's "throne will be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16; Ps 89:35–37). After a long history of deferral and reinterpretation, those hopes had been transferred to a future Messiah, who would appear at the dawn of the new age to reestablish the glory of the former empire.

Our attention is now directed to yet another "sign" in the heavens—an enormous red dragon with seven heads (12:3). In its basic configuration, the dragon is familiar as Yahweh's primordial foe, Leviathan, the many-headed sea monster (Ps 74:14). By John's day, however, the ancient epic of cosmological battle had been augmented with other associations, which he makes explicit: the dragon is "the ancient serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan" (12:9). The idea of a demonic "Adversary" is derived from Israel's legal tradition, where an "accuser" (*satan*) was called upon to testify against transgressors (Ps 109:6–7; Num 35:30). Eventually this role was mythologized and assigned to a member of the divine council, who was said to prosecute individual members of the community before the assize of Yahweh (Job 1:6–12; 2:4–5; Zech 3:1; *1 En* 40:7–8). To these two concepts, John has added a third: the "ancient serpent" of Eden, the trickster who beguiled Eve (Gen 3:1–5). These three ideas—each with a distinct tradition history and meaning—were not combined as they are here until late in the Second Temple period.

The dragon is described in the same general terms as the beast from the sea. Both are red, with ten horns, seven heads, and many diadems (12:3; cf. 13:1; 17:3–4). The coloring of the dragon apparently draws on an ancient, widely dispersed tradition, for the Egyptians and Babylonians also pictured their versions of the dragon as red. Elsewhere John associates red with bloodshed (6:4), and that is likely the intended effect here as well. The diadems on the dragon's heads symbolize political power. As the "ruler of this world," the dragon has authority over all the kings of the earth (John 12:31; Luke 4:5–6; cf. Rev 1:5). The ten horns symbolize ten rulers, who are to join forces with the beast at Armageddon (17:12; 19:19).

With a mighty sweep of its tail, the dragon hurls a third of the stars to the earth (12:4). This cosmic disturbance is based on one of Daniel's visions, in which the little horn "grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them" (Dan 8:10). In its original formulation, this celestial event referred to the rise of Antiochus Epiphanes, who slaughtered many Jews and suppressed traditional

religious customs (1 Macc. 1:41–61). Writing under the guise of the sage Daniel, an unknown apocalyptic seer has interpreted that conflict in religious terms as an assault upon heaven. John has continued that train of thought, but in a purely mythological form, with only a remote historical basis. In Revelation, the dislocated stars have become rebellious angels, who have joined forces with Satan to fight against the armies of heaven (12:7). The consequences of their subsequent defeat are manifest in the trumpet series, where three plagues are unleashed by fallen stars (8:8ff.; cf. Luke 10:18; 2 Pet 2:4).

The scene now shifts from heaven to earth. The dragon has become terrestrial because he was defeated in battle and subsequently evicted from heaven (12:9, 13). The celestial woman is there because she has assumed her secondary identity as the earthly community of salvation.

Scheming to eliminate the messianic savior before he can achieve his destiny, the dragon moves into position to devour the woman's baby as it emerges from the womb. But before the monster can seize its intended victim, the child is miraculously "snatched up" to God.

Thwarted in its plan, the dragon now turns its full fury onto the woman. But she too is miraculously saved: once by sprouting wings and flying away (12:14: cf. Isa 40:31), and once by the personified earth, which opens its mouth to swallow the flood waters sent to expunge her (12:16).

The woman retreats into the wilderness, where she has "a place prepared by God" (12:6, 14). As many times elsewhere in Revelation, John here invokes an exodus typology, where the events of the end time recapitulate the sacred events of Israel's early history. Just as in the forty years following the exodus, when the Hebrew tribes dwelt in the desert and were sustained by manna from heaven (Exod 16:11–35), so too at the end of history, the holy people will return to the desert for refuge, there to be nourished and protected by God. The desert is viewed here not as the locus of desolation and evil, as in some biblical texts (e.g., 17:3), but as a place of spiritual renewal (Isa 41:18–20; Jer 31:2).

The period of divine protection and nurture is to last 1,260 days. This is one of five allusions to the three and a half year time period marking the final stage of history, when the earth will be given over to the dragon and his minions (13:5; cf. 12:6, 14; 11:2–3). In addition to 1,260 days, this eschatological time span is variously calculated as forty-two months and as "time, times, and half a time" (i.e., three and a half years, if "times" is taken to mean two years). Here again, this interval is derived from the book of Daniel, where it refers concretely to the period of defilement when a pagan idol was set up within the temple (Dan 7:25; 8:13–14; 12:7, 11).

Thwarted yet again by the concealment of the celestial woman, the enraged dragon turns to a new target, her offspring (or "seed"), who now become the permanent focus of his fury (12:17; cf. 13:7). This circumstance alludes to the post-Edenic curse Yahweh laid upon the serpent: "I will put enmity between

you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15). In historical terms, the woman's "seed" would be a marginalized cult community, which is experiencing systematic persecution from powerful foes.

COMMENTARY

Any viable understanding of the text must begin with the identity of the mysterious woman who appears in the heavens. Who or what does this celestial figure symbolize?

Christians have traditionally identified the woman with Mary, mother of Jesus;[3] however, this is to read a meaning into the text that simply is not there. In the gospels, Mary is presented as a virtuous but unexceptional maiden, chosen for her task because of her very ordinariness and modesty (Luke 1:26–38). Mary was not elevated from her humble state to become the Queen of Heaven until much later, during the Middle Ages. It is not Jesus' biological mother that John has in view. This woman has cosmological stature.

Another frequent suggestion is that the woman, together with her story, has been acquired from a tradition external to Judiaism.[4] Certainly it is true that the myth recounted in Revelation 12 is not unique to the Bible. The basic storyline appeared in a variety of guises throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. In Greek mythology, for example, the dragon Python chases the pregnant Leto to prevent her from bearing Zeus' son. Leto is saved by a providential wind, which carries her by sea to the island of Delos, where Apollo is born. As an infant just four days old, Apollo returns to Mount Parnassus and kills the dragon in his lair. The Egyptians and Babylonians told similar stories. In its oldest forms, the myth dramatizes the diurnal battle between the sun god and the forces of darkness. With the approach of night, the dragon attempts to kill the bearer of light, sending him into hiding, but with the dawn of a new day, the hero returns to slay his eternal foe.

While there can be little doubt that the episode in Revelation is related to these older variants, it is nonetheless unlikely that John borrowed his story directly from foreign sources. Here, as consistently elsewhere, he is almost certainly drawing on the sacred traditions of his own religious community. The meaning that the story held for Greeks or Egyptians is not the meaning it has in its present form and context.

Some elements of the story have clearly been adopted from the Hebrew Bible. As noted in the exposition, John incorporates several scriptural motifs, in particular the exodus theme and the idea of a Messiah. Nonetheless, the underlying plot and symbolic feminine figure are not based on known Jewish or Christian sources. Though many vague analogies can be cited, a close parallel to this episode is not found in normative church tradition. Moreover, such scriptural allusions as do occur are presented in a non-standard way. We

are dealing here with a line of thought that has roots in Judaism, but with a divergent understanding of what that common heritage signifies.

The closest analogue is found not in the Hebrew Bible or in contemporary Jewish midrashes, but in a Sethian text, the *Revelation of Adam*.[5] The myth recounted there incorporates the same basic themes manifest in the story of the celestial woman: the birth of a messianic figure who receives "glory and strength" from God (78.10–17; cf. Rev 12:5); persecution by a demonic power (77.4–18; cf. Rev 12:4, 13); rescue by a "bird of heaven" (78.9–13; cf. Rev 12:14); a great flood sent to destroy the "people into whom has passed the life of knowledge" (69.2–18; cf. Rev 12:15); safe removal of the elect to "the place where the spirit of life dwells" (69.19–24; 72.3–11; cf. Rev 12:6, 14); continued oppression of the "offspring of the great race" (83.4–8; cf. 65.7–8; Rev 12:17). Of particular interest is a short poem relating the trials and triumph of the Illuminator:

> He came from a virgin womb;
> He was banished from his city along with his mother,
> He was brought to a desert place.
> He nourished himself there;
> He came and received glory and power. (78.18–26)

Clearly this line of tradition is familiar with a variant form of the myth underlying Revelation 12. In this instance, however, we are not left wondering what tangible form evil has assumed. The text contains explicit polemic against the priests in charge of baptism, who have "defiled the water of life and have drawn it in accordance with the will of the powers, into whose hands you have been given."[6] These officials have blasphemed "the living God with lawless voices and unlawful tongues and souls full of blood and foulness." Beyond doubt, it is the religious establishment, rather than the Roman imperium, that oppresses "the holy seed."

The social context that shaped John's version of this myth is key to unlocking its intended meaning. Three independent pieces of evidence point toward the specific community that stands in the close background of the biblical text.

The first clue is found within Revelation itself, in the abbreviated portrait of Christ's earthly career. Immediately after birth, the child is snatched up to heaven (12:5). Here there is no mention of crucifixion or resurrection, just a sanitized ascent directly to a waiting throne. The central events of the normative Christian narrative have been bypassed—the gore and despair and sudden joy all completely disregarded. Presumably these are not mentioned because for the audience to whom this myth is directed, these were inconsequential events. And of course, this is exactly what we find in Sethian literature. As a rule, gnostic versions of the gospel skip over the mundane events

of Jesus' life and begin with the exalted Christ, who appears to his followers in the role of a heavenly revealer of knowledge.

The second clue is an anomalous external circumstance. For reasons explained earlier, just sixty or seventy years after it first appeared, Revelation was no longer accepted as an authoritative scripture in Asia Minor. Among the churches of that region, one would expect to find a strong tradition connecting the book with the historical communities named in the seven letters. Instead the Alogi successfully linked Revelation to the notorious gnostic Cerinthus, leading to its disavowal by the very churches to whom it is addressed, even as it continued to gain prestige and general acceptance elsewhere. Though Cerinthus did advocate millenarian views reminiscent of those in Revelation, we have no reason to think that this attribution is true. He was simply the most visible representative of the gnostic movement in Asia Minor and for that reason a convenient target. What does seem plausible is that proto-orthodox Christians had observed that their gnostic opponents frequently cited Revelation, perhaps even using it as a platform to challenge ecclesiastical authority. How else to explain the adamant rejection of the book in the place of its origin?

This conjecture is supported by the little that we do know about the background of the book. What is probably the earliest known allusion to Revelation occurs in the *Secret Book of John*, a Sethian text already discussed in detail. In an editorially composed introduction, the gnostic Revealer tells the apostle "I have come to teach you what is, what was, and what is to come" thereby citing Revelation 1:19 as an authoritative scripture.[7] Though not independently attested until around 180 CE, the *Secret Book of John* is certainly older than that—in its present redactional form dated perhaps as early as 130 CE, with a core text that likely predates Christianity. In contrast, familiarity with the book of Revelation is not attested among proto-orthodox theologians until about 160 CE. This would suggest that Revelation was known in Sethian circles at an early date, possibly prior to its general use and recognition by proto-orthodox Christians. It may be that—as its title suggests—the *Secret Book of John* was regarded as the esoteric version of the Revelation of John, the latter being intended for public consumption by the unenlightened.[8]

A third clue to the social origin of Revelation is found in the seven letters to the churches of Asia. There a group called the "Nicolaitans" is singled out as the object of profound "hate" (2:6). The list of their many sins includes idolatry, immorality, and participation in pagan feasts (2:14, 20–22; cf. 21:8). One has to take into account, however, who is speaking. The letters are dictated by a "voice like a sound of a trumpet," a simile directly based on the "little horn" described in the book of Daniel (1:10; cf. Dan7:8, 11; 11:36). From John's perspective, the speaker is the mouthpiece of Satan himself (13:5),

here acting in the role of "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" (12:10). The content and tone of the letters is apparently based on the slander of the proto-orthodox, whom John is parroting.[9] The purpose of these missives, therefore, is not to rally the "conquerors," but to illustrate the persecution and "affliction" of the true saints (2:22)—namely the Nicolaitans.

The disciples murdered by Morning Star (2:16, 23) are the first casualties in an all-out assault on the gnostic elect (13:7; 11:7; 21:8). Here again, the book of Daniel has provided the basic template: "the horn waged war on the holy people and prevailed over them" (7:21). Like his biblical predecessors, however, John fights not on the side of the ruling elite, but on behalf of the oppressed. The Nicolaitans may be Satan's foes, but their prophets—"Jezebel" and "Balaam"—are almost certainly John's allies, fellow messengers from the same charismatic movement (cf. 22:9).

Given this social context, who then is the woman "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars"? Because she bears multiple symbolic associations, the celestial woman cannot be reduced to any one mythological figure. Several lines of tradition have converged to create this multi-faceted image of transcendent glory. One can find traces therein of various feminine figures such as mother Zion giving birth to a messianic savior (Isa 66:7–9), Leto fleeing from the dragon (Hyginus, *Fabulae* 53, 140), and Israel borne "on eagle's wings" to a safe place in the desert (Exod 19:4; cf. Rev12:14). To these known contributions, however, one other must now be added: Barbelo, the female principle in the gnostic divine triad.

In the *Secret Book of John*, Barbelo is described as "the image of the perfect invisible Virgin Spirit," "the womb of everything," "the perfect glory among the aeons." In concert with the primal Father, she brought Christ, the "Only Child," into being and through him, the rest of the eternal realms. The twelve stars in the woman's crown thus symbolize both the twelve aeons of the *plerōma* and the twelve tribes of Israel, for Barbelo is at once a cosmological figure and the source and center of a community. Her role is to illuminate the darkness of earthly existence. In gnostic thought, the female principle acts as the bringer of insight, the interface between the human and the divine realms. As such, she proclaims:

> I am the abundance of light,
> I am the remembrance of the Fullness . . .
> Let those who hear arise from deep sleep[10]

Through this summons, the goddess seeks to awaken her listeners from their ongoing slumber, to rouse the memory of their origin in the realm of light.

From the preceding discussion, it will be clear that the celestial woman is not, as often supposed, a precursor to the bride, a substitute metaphor for the church. Rather we are presented here with an opposing choice. This woman represents an unrealized possibility—an alternative identity that could have been adopted but who was rejected instead.

She still waits, hidden in the wilderness.

NOTES

1. Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 1.86–87, 92; *2 Enoch* 30:4–6.
2. *Midrash Rabbah* Numbers 2:14; *Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 15:6.
3. So the sixth century scholar Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 12.1.
4. For example: A. Dietrich, *Abraxas*, pp. 117–22 (Greek myth of Apollo-Leto-Python); H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, pp. 379–98 (Babylonian myth of Damkina-Marduk-Tiamat); W. Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, pp. 350–56 (Egyptian myth of Isis-Osiris-Horus-Typhon).
5. For an extended discussion of the parallels between Revelation 12 and the *Revelation of Adam*, see J. M. Robinson, "On the *Gattung* of Mark (and John)," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, pp. 119–24; J. D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Bibliotheque Copte De Nag Hammadi–Section Etudes 6), pp. 159–62.
6. *Revelation of Adam* 84.5–22.
7. *Secret Book of John* NHL II, 2.16–18. Variations of this tripartite formula also occur in Hellenistic oracles, so a direct dependence on the corresponding passage in Revelation cannot be assumed. However, in view of the many ideological connections between these two documents, some sort of relationship is likely. In both texts, Christ appears to "John" in an aura of bright light, proclaims "Do not be afraid," makes a series of self-disclosures in the "I am …" format, then reveals divine mysteries concerning the past, present, and future.
8. See E. Pagels, *Revelations*, pp. 84–86.
9. For example, the pejorative name "Balaam," applied to a Nicolaitan prophet in Rev 2:14, is attested in proto-orthodox writings as a slur for gnostic opponents (2 Pet 2:15; Jude 11).
10. *Secret Book of John* NHL II 30.15–16; 31.5–6.

Conclusion

Excelsior

REVELATION RECONSIDERED

Scholars have long thought of Revelation as the paradigmatic example of that class of literature commonly identified as "apocalyptic."[1] This perception is based, in part, on historical priority. As far as is known, Revelation was the first book to be explicitly designated by the Greek term *apokalypsis*, thereby characterizing the contents as an "unveiling" of heavenly mysteries. Later use of the term as a genre label was based on the book's title. For that reason, Revelation is widely perceived as the normative expression of this literary category, an implicit standard to which other works may be compared to determine whether or not they have the distinguishing characteristics that typify an apocalypse.

Though prevalent since antiquity, this view is no longer universally accepted. Over the last few decades, several scholars have pointed out that Revelation does not fit the apocalyptic mold in many key respects.[2] The book's literary classification is by no means a purely academic distinction. This determination is crucial to any grounded appraisal. The genre defines not only the form of the document, but also its underlying purpose and social context.

The great majority of known apocalypses are rooted in a specific time and place. Religious literature of this kind flourished in the Mediterranean world from about 200 BCE to 200 CE. The genre appeared first among Jews, then subsequently among Christians and Sethian gnostics. Though similar writings have been identified in other eras and locations, this period has the earliest, best documented, and most widely known examples of the genre.

Historically, apocalypticism is the child of prophecy, as evidenced by the fact that the earliest known proto-apocalyptic texts have been appended to prophetic books, most notably Isaiah and Zechariah. This lineage remains

visible in the many continuities of theme, symbolism, and eschatology linking these later works to their prophetic antecedents.

Nonetheless, apocalypticism cannot be understood as simply an extension or continuation of prophecy. Despite their common cultural roots and linked symbolism, these two classes of literature emerge from fundamentally different enterprises.

The social role of a prophet was that of a messenger, tasked with delivering divine announcements to the community. Even when couched in mythological terms, these messages always addressed concrete social, religious, or political issues. Consequently, prophets engaged their listeners personally—exhorting, counseling, comforting, admonishing, reassuring, or denouncing, as required by the immediate situation. As spokespersons of the deity, prophets were the active, visible agent of the divine will.

Where a prophet functioned as the god's mouthpiece, the apocalypticist was more nearly akin to a sage or seer. Immediate historical circumstances were only indirectly of concern. Instead the seer gazed into a symbolic universe realized within another plane of existence. This transcendent domain was not directly accessible to the community and therefore had to be mediated and explained by an angelic interpreter dispatched from that distant realm. The apocalyptic seer was thus a passive witness to the disclosure of otherworldly secrets, which—within the fictional framework of the narrative—were often relevant only to a generation as yet unborn.

Broadly speaking, the apocalyptic mindset arose from a mismatch between strongly held beliefs and everyday experience. The gap between what now is and what should be caused an overwhelming existential dissonance, which was resolved by devaluing the world as found and replacing it with a world ordered according to conviction. Seen from that vantage, existing social and political structures seemed temporary and illusory; instead the locus of perceived reality was to be found within the transcendent realm.

Typically knowledge of the transcendent world was obtained through a vision. Transported to a distant place, the seer was shown an alternative reality that embodied the qualities lacking in the world as presently ordered. The characteristic features of the other realm varied depending on the nature of the perceived deficit in mundane life. If the existing social order was seen as unjust, then justice would be attained beyond history. In Jewish and Christian tradition, this squaring generally took the form of a general resurrection and final judgment, recompensing the righteous and the wicked according to what each had done. If, however, the world was perceived as vain and empty of meaning, as in the case of the gnostics, then spiritual fulfillment would be realized through ascent to a realm of wondrous metaphysical splendor. In either scenario, the shortcomings experienced in mundane existence would be corrected in the alternative reality. This resolution might occur temporally, through divine intervention in history, or spatially, through ascent and permanent residence in the transcendent plane.

Some apocalypses were triggered by an identifiable crisis. A clear example of this is the book of Daniel, which was codified in response to external oppression. An overt social or political crisis is not, however, a necessary precondition. More typically, the motivating cause was a perceived crisis which had developed over a long period of time. These crises were not precipitated by an invading army or violent social upheaval, but by less tangible factors such as culture shock or the loss of traditional privileges and status. Crises of this kind would not necessarily be seen as such by an observer independent of the community.

Common to all apocalyptic visions was an underlying dissatisfaction with the world as found. In every instance, the communities that generated and sustained these visions were suppressed in some way by the dominant political or religious regime, leading to a deep and pervasive alienation. Out of that estrangement emerged the perception that the cosmos is corrupt and decaying, and therefore moving inexorably toward collapse and replacement by a new world order. An apocalypse was thus a bridge linking what now is to what ought to be. It was fundamentally an assertion that—despite all appearances to the contrary—God is in control of the world and would bring the hopes of the faithful to fruition.

It can hardly be denied that Revelation meets many of the criteria of the genre. Here we find characteristic features such as symbolic visions, angelic guides, the periodization of history, and an alternative transcendent reality. The eschatological drama presents us with the usual stark contrasts between God and Satan, heaven and earth, the saved and the damned, the present age of distress and the future era of bliss. The vision was apparently nurtured within a dissident group, which had been vigorously persecuted by church officials. All this strongly suggests that John's book should be categorized as an apocalypse.

Yet there are contrary indications as well. The most obvious departure from that norm is the explicit identification of the author. John does not adopt the guise of a venerated authority figure such as Moses, Abraham, or Paul. Instead he writes in his own name as a known person familiar to his audience. No other apocalypse makes a comparable claim. Unlike prophets, who base their personal authority on a direct commission from the deity, apocalyptic writers have no institutional platform from which to demand a hearing and therefore must rely on the borrowed authority of an assumed persona. Pseudonymity is for that reason a defining characteristic of this class of literature.

An additional factor pointing toward a different literary classification is that John explicitly identifies his words as "prophecy," both at the beginning and at the close of his book (1:3; 22:10, 18–19). Clearly he understood his role to be that of a prophet.[3] This self-understanding was not typical of apocalyptic seers, who generally attributed their visions to a revered sage, scribe,

patriarch, or apostle, but only rarely to an ancient prophet. In their eyes, these other functionaries more closely approximated their own social role. John, in contrast, implicitly includes himself among "your brothers the prophets" (22:9).

This self-perception is evident in the notable lack of another typifying feature of the genre. Many apocalypses contain *ex eventu* prophecies, in which the seer retrospectively recounts historical events, recast as ancient predictions of a future only now being realized. John, in contrast, situates himself in the present, addressing his words to a contemporary audience and immediate historical circumstances, as described in the seven letters to the churches of Asia.

Finally, Revelation lacks a key attribute of all apocalyptic thought, namely an explicit, sharply defined dualism. To be sure, conflict between the forces of good and evil dominates the book, but as we have seen, the opposition of the two exists primarily at a surface level. The whore and the bride, the Lamb and the beast, Babylon and New Jerusalem are different facets of the same underlying reality. John uses the dynamic interplay between opposites as a literary device that propels the narrative towards a shattering eschatological finale that explodes the boundaries delineating normative moral and spiritual categories. In that feat of astonishing bravado, he unmistakably reveals his true identity as a prophet, for here he acts not as a passive observer of divine mysteries, but as an empowered agent of historical change.

These considerations indicate that Revelation is properly regarded not as an early manifestation of apocalypticism, but as a reversion to older prophetic modes of thought. John draws on the language and imagery of apocalyptic eschatology because that was the religious idiom of his time and place; his purpose, however, is unmistakably prophetic. The book is designed to confront transgressors with their moral and religious failings. Though he projects an elaborate picture of a glorious New Age in the manner of the apocalyptic seers, John does so only to shatter that image, thereby reducing normative Christian constructs to a theological rubbleheap.

THE STORM OF GOD

The book of Revelation is a roaring wind from a distant time and place, a tempest of immense scope and unquenchable fury which has unexpectedly swept ashore in our own time. Obliterating all obstacles in its path, the typhoon has stripped away every tree and fence, building and wall, leaving nothing but wreckage and barren landscape in its wake. So complete is the devastation that the world itself has collapsed: "the sky split and rolled up like a scroll and every mountain and island was moved from its place" (6:14).

The cosmos thus expunged is not, of course, the physical universe, as has long been assumed and anticipated. John had no knowledge of science and little interest in the natural world. His prophecy is directed instead against the symbolic universe encoded in the idea of heaven, or more specifically, against the normative structures of Christian belief and expectation. It is against that world that he has prophesied, and it is that world that has now come to an end—even though many still dwell there, not having discerned the full scope of the catastrophe.

As the last book in the Christian canon, Revelation is widely regarded as the culminating disclosure of the divine plan, the final act in the ongoing drama of God and his people. In a certain ironical sense, that premise remains valid, for Revelation does indeed bring closure to sacred history, though not in the anticipated manner. Instead of vindicating the elect, the book presents us with the unrelenting negation of virtually everything that the church has affirmed. The Bible thus concludes, as it began, with the earth "formless and void, and blackness on the face of the deep" (Gen 1:2).

John's emphatic repudiation is based on a perceptive and unflinching critique of the early church. That appraisal, delivered before Christianity as we know it even existed, has unerringly anticipated the many fallacies and inconsistencies that have characterized the institution ever since. It would be wrong to assume, however, that the proclaimed judgment is motivated purely by personal spite. Though appalling in its harshness and finality, this is a verdict firmly based on biblical jurisprudence.

The primary infraction of which the church stands accused is idolatry. John includes his proto-orthodox rivals among those who serve "idols of gold and of silver and of brass and of stone and of wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk" (9:20). The Christian idol is portrayed as a seated statue adorned with precious stones (4:3), but the "image of the beast" is unambiguously a metaphor rather than a tangible cult object. The idol enshrined within the church is a mental construct, the vain imagining of those who would project their own moral and spiritual limitations onto God.

A second, closely related charge is blasphemy. In the very act of praising and glorifying the deity, the church defames God, both passively, through acquiescence in slander (13:5–8), and actively, through false worship (e.g., 15:3–4). Conventionally, of course, blasphemy has been understood as speech that is contrary to ecclesiastical norms and values. But to John, those same norms and values were themselves sacrilegious. From his perspective, blasphemy is not so much an extraordinary act of desecration as the day-to-day profanity of a worship that exalts egotism, vengeance, bigotry, and violence as divine attributes.[4]

To illustrate his point, the prophet has taken up the hymnody of the early church, exaggerated it, and placed the resulting caricature on the lips of the

angels and saints (e.g., 7:10–12; 19:1–6). Though lavish in praise, these hymns are hardly flattering, for most tacitly assume that the deity is a petty, vindictive tyrant. Over and over again, the heavenly choir exalts a God of brute power and fathomless cruelty, never pausing to consider whether the object of their worship represents a high spiritual standard, let alone what allegiance to such a monstrosity might imply for their own collective destiny.

Because of its scathingly satirical intent, John's portrait of proto-orthodox piety is, of course, inherently unfair. Yet the fact that the church has never recognized that it is being mocked—instead incorporating elements of the parody into new songs of praise—indicates, at the very least, a pervasive lack of discernment.

THE FEAST OF BAAL

In biblical tradition, idolatry is the most heinous of all sins. The classical prophets, in particular, were ferocious in condemning that transgression and unanimous in prescribing its consequences. For those who abandon the way of truth in order to follow a god of their own making, the inescapable outcome is death. John—who understood himself as the successor to that tradition—fully shared in their assessment. He has drawn on the following episode as a paradigm of final judgment:

> Jehu gathered all the people and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little; Jehu will serve him much. Now, summon all the prophets of Baal, all his worshipers and all his priests. Let no one be missing, for I have a great sacrifice for Baal; whoever is missing shall not live." But Jehu did it in cunning, so that he might destroy the worshipers of Baal. So Jehu said, "Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal." And they proclaimed it. Then Jehu sent throughout Israel and all the worshipers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And when they went into the house of Baal, the house of Baal was filled from one end to the other. He said to the one who was in charge of the wardrobe, "Bring out garments for all the worshipers of Baal." . . . Then they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. . . . As soon as he had finished the burnt offering, Jehu said to the guard and to the royal officers, "Go in, kill them; let none come out." . . . Thus Jehu eradicated Baal from Israel. (2 Kgs 10:18–28)

In the same way, the followers of the Lamb have been invited to a "marriage supper" (19:9). Letters have been sent out to the churches, announcing the feast (2:1ff.). Everyone who attends is to be given a white linen garment to wear (19:8; 3:5; 7:13–14). Gathering in a "great multitude" in the heavenly temple, the saints will praise their idol, "the One sitting on the throne," and rejoice in the doom of the wicked (19:1–6; 7:9–17). Unrecognized by the celebrants, however, is the true purpose of the rendezvous: they themselves are to comprise the "great sacrifice for Baal" (Zeph 1:7–9).

The all-inclusive scope of the final holocaust is indicated by the anticipatory summons to the carrion-eaters: "Come, gather together for the great supper of God that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—the flesh of all peoples, free and slave, small and great."[5] The first four groups in this list would refer to the beast and his military entourage (19:19). Up to that point, the scenario conforms to the standard apocalyptic paradigm, which typically culminates in the destruction of the forces of wickedness. John, however, has given the usual denouement an unexpected twist, evident in the last three groups listed in the roll-call of the damned: the slaves, the small, and the great. Immediately preceding the slaughter, a voice from the throne explicitly identifies the saints with these very same groups (19:5).[6] It would seem, therefore, that it is not the elect who are to dine at the "marriage supper of the Lamb"—that honor has been reserved for the vultures alone.[7] The saints are indeed to be in attendance, but only as food for the carrion-eaters (cf. 17:16).

THE PROPHET AS PARADOX

Given that John thought of himself as a prophet, how then should we construe his message and role today? What, if anything, did he accomplish to deserve that status?

It is notoriously difficult for the denizens of one world to fairly evaluate the inhabitants of another, especially when that realm is as foreign in every possible way as is his to our own. Nonetheless, this much at least can be said: John was not a kind person and arguably not a virtuous one either. His book has been a festering sore upon the history of the West, repeatedly used to incite war, justify brutality, and foment social unrest. Instead of leveraging his spiritual authority to promote healing and truth, John spun a web of deliberate falsehoods, designed to entrap the unwary. From that dark and ethically flawed vision, nothing good has ever come—only suffering and delusion.

Yet there can be no denying John's stature as a prophet. Seldom before and never since has there appeared a visionary of such shattering power, prescience, and far-reaching impact. The only prophet of comparable standing is Ezekiel—who bears the same relationship to Judaism as John does to Christianity.[8] With breathtaking audacity, John has confronted a whole civilization, indicted it publically for its crimes, and successfully obtained a conviction in the court of world history. He accomplished all this, moreover, hundreds of years before the contours of that social order had fully emerged into view.

We have indeed been visited by a true prophet. And just like his ancient Israelite predecessors, his is a harsh and disturbing message that no one wants to hear.

THE NEW EXODUS

The theme of exodus—understood as deliverance from bondage—is one of the central paradigms of biblical narrative. The most familiar recounting is, of course, found in the Torah, but the theme recurs in many other scriptural contexts as well. Among the most memorable of these is the vivid poetry of an unknown exilic prophet:

> Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
> Declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,
> Send it forth to the end of the earth;
> Say "Yahweh has redeemed his servant Jacob!"
> They thirsted not when he led them through the deserts;
> He made water flow for them from the rock;
> He cleft the rock and water gushed out. (Isa 48:20–21; cf. Exod 17:6)

Here the exile in Babylon is understood as a parallel event to the captivity in Egypt. The return of the banished Judahites to their sacred homeland is to recapitulate the miracles in the Sinai desert, when Yahweh acted to sustain the people of Israel as they journeyed toward their promised land. As with every other restatement of this theme, the idea of exodus here evokes both a departure from a situation of oppression and movement toward a liberating ideal.

The exodus theme also appears prominently in the book of Revelation. We have already noted that the sequence of terrors unleashed by the trumpets and bowls recapitulates the series of plagues recounted in the exodus tradition. A summons to depart follows soon thereafter, in the context of captivity in "Babylon": "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins and share in her plagues" (18:4; cf. Jer 51:45).

As with any leave-taking, those who would depart must first decide what should be taken and what must be left behind. This is precisely the situation of the church today. What part of the gospel is fallacy and what part remains valid? Which hopes must be discarded and which can be retained?

Regardless of how one understands Jesus in historical terms, the concept of Christ represents the intersection of God and humanity, the meeting point of the transcendent and the immanent. It is this idea that distinguishes Christianity from other world religions, and it is on the basis of that foundational idea that its success or failure must be judged.

The historical record shows that different groups within the church responded to that call in differing and often incompatible ways. Proto-orthodox Christians affirmed the reality of the incarnation, but—unable to bear the ambiguity implied by the convergence of the human and the divine—ultimately made the cross into a new absolute, thereby re-creating

the rigid spiritual dichotomies of first century Judaism. The gnostics, on the other hand, embraced the merger with a radicalness and daring that still astonishes; yet they sustained their visionary flights only by severing all connection with social and physical reality.

In the end, none of these groups was fully successful. Proto-orthodox Christians and Jews established religions that were durable and pragmatic but not profound; the gnostics developed a worldview that was sometimes profound, but neither durable nor well-grounded.

It remains to be seen whether we today can achieve the clarity that has eluded so many for so long. But this much is certain: we cannot retreat to the safety of the old sacred archetypes. Heaven and hell are irretrievably lost, annihilated in the violence of the apocalypse. We can learn from our spiritual ancestors, but we cannot return to their symbolic world. That way is now permanently blocked, sealed by the rubble of collapsed ideologies. The only available path is the one directly before us, leading toward a destination occasionally glimpsed but never seen in full.

That journey begins here and now. The walls of Babylon have been breached, its lofty watchtowers razed to the ground. The hour of our liberation has come. Go forth in peace.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of apocalyptic as a genre label, see J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, pp. 2–8; "Toward the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979), pp. 1–20.

2. F. D. Mazzaferri, *Genre of the Book of Revelation*, p. 377; E. S. Fiorenza, "Apokalypsis and Propheteia: Revelation in the Context of Early Christian Prophecy," in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, pp. 133–56; D. Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (John Knox, 1979), pp. 70–93. For a useful summary of the discussion, see R. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 1–8.

3. C. Koester, *Revelation*, pp. 107–9.

4. This perception was expressed by the gnostic author of the *Revelation to Peter*: "Some of them [the proto-orthodox] will blaspheme the truth and proclaim evil teaching" (74.22–25).

5. See the excursus in G. MacRae, *Studies in the New Testament and Gnosticism*, pp. 259–62.

6. The phrases "free and slave" and "small and great" are hendiadys, i.e., word pairs that express a single idea or conceptual domain, which in this case would normally signify "everyone." However, John consistently uses the terms "slaves" and "small and great" in a narrower sense as a subset of "those who fear your name" (19:5, 11:18; 7:3; 22:3; cf. Ps 115:13).

7. Rev 19:17; cf. 19:9. The word *deipnon* "supper" occurs in Revelation only in these two verses. The "great supper of God" is a biting parody of the joyous eschatological banquet mentioned in many Jewish and Christian texts (e.g., Isa 25:6–8; Matt 8:11; Luke 14:15; 22:29–30).

8. See D. Arthur, "Conflict and Convergence in the Book of Ezekiel" (forthcoming).

Epilogue

The Mark of Cain

The Christian Bible is bracketed by two directionally opposed perspectives. The book of Revelation is forward-looking, oriented toward a time after time has ended. The book of Genesis looks behind, facing a time before historical time began.

Having glimpsed the end of the story, let's circle back to its beginning, to the primordial epoch when humanity's ancestors took part in foundational events that would foreshadow later developments among their descendants. Central among these primeval episodes is the tragic rivalry between the first brothers, Cain and Abel:

> Abel kept sheep, and Cain tilled the ground. In the course of time Cain brought the fruit of the ground as an offering to Yahweh, while Abel brought fat portions from the firstlings of his flock. Yahweh looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Yahweh said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do what is right, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."
>
> Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain turned against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then Yahweh said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And Yahweh said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! Now you are cursed and driven from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its nourishment; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."
>
> Cain said to Yahweh, "My punishment is greater than I can bear! Today you have driven me away from the soil, and I shall be hidden from your presence, I

> shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who comes across me may kill me." Then Yahweh said to him, "Not so! Anyone who kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And Yahweh put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. Then Cain went away from the presence of Yahweh, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. (Gen 4:2–16)

Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, the story of the first murder has long served as a cautionary tale illustrating the consequences of envy and violence. As such, it has provided a rich trove of didactic instruction, mined by countless generations of preachers, exegetes, and essayists. Even in the secular world, Cain's response, "Am I my brother's keeper?" has become a byword for the abdication of moral responsibility. The episode thus stands as the paradigmatic instance of fraternal strife, foreshadowing all subsequent wars and class struggles.

Though instructive at many levels, this tale of primeval murder is not, of course, history in the strict sense of the word. It is exceedingly doubtful that two brothers named Cain and Abel ever existed, at least in the way that they are portrayed in Genesis. Yet it would be equally inaccurate to characterize the story as a myth. The primordial deeds of the gods are not the main focus here. This is a tale about human relationships and how those relationships can go awry.

The story does encapsulate historical memory, but not in a form widely familiar to us today. In the ancient world, historical experience was often recalled not as a succession of objective facts, but as biography—episodes in the life of a king, hero, or ancestor. Projecting ethnic identity through a constructed corporate personality was an especially common practice among tribal communities, where ancestry was the primary determinant of social status.

Cain appears elsewhere in biblical tradition as the eponymous ancestor of the Kenites (e.g., Num 24:21–22). The relationship between the patriarch and the tribe is somewhat clearer in the Hebrew, where the names *qayin* (Cain) and *qênî* (Kenite) are nearly synonymous. In some instances, biblical traditionists refer to the Kenites using only the eponym *qayin* (Jdg 4:11).

As the corporate representative of his tribe, Cain embodies the historical experience of the Kenites. What the patriarch said and did in primeval times prefigures the general character and situation of his later descendants or—to state the same proposition from a modern point of view—the way that Cain's personality and activities are portrayed in the story provides historical information about the distinctive attributes of the Kenites as a sodality. We also gain some insight into how that group was perceived by the biblical traditionists who later included the episode in their own sacred history.

As originally told, the legend of Cain will have had an etiological function—that is, it interpreted present circumstances in terms of a past event. Typically stories of this kind were prompted by a puzzling social convention or geological feature that seemed to demand explanation. In this case, the implied questions are directed at what—from the outside perspective of a settled community—seem like bizarre tribal customs. Why are the Kenites nomadic? Why do they bear the mark of Yahweh upon their foreheads? What is the origin of the radical form of blood vengeance practiced by the tribe? The answers given to these questions are fanciful, but the questions themselves have a firm historical basis.

The Kenites are known to biblical tradition as a nomadic tribe inhabiting the desert regions to the south and east of Canaan. Most were probably shepherds, but some may have been itinerant metalworkers or musicians. These occupations are attributed to Cain's descendants, who include Jabal, "the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock"; Jubal, "the father of those who play the lyre and pipe"; and Tubal-Cain, "the forger of implements of bronze and iron" (Gen 4:20–22).

During the period of settlement, a branch of the tribe is said to have migrated with the Judahites to "the Negev near Arad," where they established a community (Jdg 1:16). A list detailing the tribal allotment of Judah includes the villages of Kinah and Kain, adjacent to the southeast border with Edom (Josh 15:22, 57). Another Kenite lineage descended from the patriarch Rechab settled farther north, near Jerusalem (Jer 35:2–10; 1 Chr 2:55).

The Kenites evidently enforced a code of emphatic blood vengeance. To injure one of the tribe was to incur overwhelming retribution. This custom is attested not only here in the story of Cain (4:15), but also—in an even more extreme form—in the boast of Cain's descendant, Lamech:

> I have killed a man for wounding me,
> a young man for striking me.
> If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
> then Lamech seventy-sevenfold (Gen 4:23–24)

The threat of escalated retaliation served to protect a scattered population otherwise vulnerable to attack.

An intended consequence of the custom was a reputation for ferocity, which seems to have been deserved. The Kenites do not appear frequently in the biblical record, but when they do, it is generally in connection with some act of violence. In the book of Judges, for example, we are told that the Kenites joined an alliance of tribes that attacked and destroyed the Canaanite city of Zephath (Jdg 1:16–19). Caleb, a scion of the closely related Kenizzite tribe, had a central role in that and subsequent military successes (Jdg 1:12, 20). When the Israelites were oppressed by a foreign king, Yahweh raised up

Caleb's brother, Othniel, as a "deliverer" to lead the tribes in battle (Jdg 3:8–11). Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, was celebrated for killing Israel's arch enemy Sisera with a tent peg (Jdg 4:17–22; 5:24–27). Jehonadab, son of the Kenite patriarch Rechab, joined Jehu in slaughtering the retainers and family of the deposed Ahab, followed by a massacre of Baal worshippers (2 Kgs 10:15–17, 23).

In addition to their ferocity, the Kenites and Kenizzites were renowned for their unwavering commitment to Yahweh. Moses himself is said to have praised Caleb for "following Yahweh unreservedly" (Num 32:12; Josh 14:6–14). Unlike the disobedient Israelites, Caleb had a "different spirit," thereby meriting Yahweh's unqualified approval (Num 14:24). Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah praised the Rechabites for their steadfast adherence to their ancient way of life, which included dwelling in tents and abstinence from wine (Jer 35:1–10). In contrast to the people of Jerusalem, whom he had consigned to slaughter and exile, Yahweh promised the faithful Rechabites that their forefather "shall not lack a man to stand before me always" (Jer 35:18–19).

Though valued as a fierce ally in war and widely admired for their religious zeal, the raw fanaticism of the Kenites apparently dismayed some of their more cultured co-religionists. This ambivalence is clearly discernible in the Genesis story, which attributes Cain's nomadism to a curse: "you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth." The "sign" on Cain's forehead—which the Kenites surely would have construed as a badge of divine favor—likewise assumes an ambiguous character as a symbol both of Yahweh's protection and the mark of a murderer. Though implicitly conceding Cain's place in Israel's sacred history, the narrator plainly views the patriarch as a morally compromised figure.

More may be involved in that ambivalence than genteel disdain for the primitive customs of desert nomads. The Israelites had not always served Yahweh, a fact of which early biblical traditionists were fully aware. On Mount Sinai, Yahweh is said to have introduced himself to Moses by proclaiming: "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them" (Exod 6:2–3). Here we are explicitly told that the name Yahweh was unknown to Israel's ancestors; instead they worshipped a different god, with whom Yahweh is now identified. In this way, the tradition acknowledges that Yahweh was not the god of Israel from time immemorial. The divine name—and implicitly the cult associated with it—was adopted at a specific historical juncture.

In view of the Kenites' fervor and deep involvement in the early history of Israel, a number of prominent scholars have surmised that these nomads introduced the worship of Yahweh to neighboring Hebrew tribes. The evidence for this conjecture is largely indirect and circumstantial. Given the paucity of reliable information and the remote date and location of this presumed indoctrination, a firm conclusion is not currently possible, and likely never will be. Nonetheless, such threads of evidence as we do have persuasively point in that general direction.[1]

As originally formulated in the nineteenth century, the Kenite hypothesis was largely based on the close relationship between Moses and his father-in-law, variously called Jethro, Reuel, or Hobab. One strand of the tradition identifies the father-in-law as a Midianite (Exod 3:1), while another refers to him as a Kenite (Jdg 4:11). It may be that Reuel, Jethro, Hobab, and Cain were the names of Midianite clans or lineages, which would neatly resolve the contradiction, but this is not certain. According to tradition, Moses dwelt in Midian for a considerable time—long enough to have two children and learn local customs (Exod 2:15–3:12). The father-in-law—explicitly called "the priest of Midian"—would presumably have presided over any religious ceremonies conducted within the household.

During this period, Moses encountered Yahweh on a sacred mountain bordering Midianite territory (Exod 3:1–2). Later on, after leading a band of Hebrews out of Egypt, Moses returned to the sacred mountain, where he met his father-in-law and greeted him with the obeisance proper to one of inferior status (Exod 18:7). Proclaiming that "Yahweh is greater than all the gods," the father-in-law then pronounced a blessing, performed a sacrificial offering, and presided over a sacramental meal (Exod 18:9–12). When it came time to judge the assembled people, the father-in-law instructed Moses on the proper method of conducting and disposing the cases (Exod 18:17–24). All this leads to the obvious conclusion that Moses adopted the laws, holy site, and god of a local Midianite cult.

Because the historical basis of the exodus narrative is unclear, most scholars today are justifiably reluctant to press this argument too far. Many details remain uncertain. What does seem clear is that the group represented by Moses had an intimate and continuing relationship with the Kenites and/or Midianites. That relationship may have been cemented through intermarriage, as indicated by the tradition, or by a formal covenant linking the two groups, as hinted elsewhere.[2] In either case, we can be sure that the association was validated and sustained by shared religious concepts.

A stronger argument for associating the Kenites with the origins of Yahwism is based on fragments of early Hebrew poetry that locate Yahweh on a holy mountain somewhere in the desert to the east or south. From there, Yahweh is shown rising in splendor to appear before his worshippers in Israel:

> Yahweh came from Sinai;
> He dawned upon us from Seir;
> he shone forth from Mount Paran. (Deut 33:2)

> God came from Teman,
> the Holy One from Mount Paran.
> His glory covered the heavens,
> and the earth was full of his praise. (Hab 3:3)

Other related theophanies picture Yahweh marching from his distant abode to do battle with Israel's enemies:

> Who is this that comes from Edom,
> from Bozrah in garments stained crimson? . . .
> "It is I, proclaiming victory,
> mighty to save." (Isa 63:1)

The precise location of the divine dwelling place is unclear: Sinai, Teman, Bozrah, Mount Paran, Seir, and Edom are all mentioned, often in poetic parallelism, indicating that these terms were considered loosely synonymous. Most—perhaps all—of these geographical references are connected with the mountainous region of Edom. The association between Mount Sinai and what is today called the Sinai Peninsula appears to be a later development. In any case, that Yahweh's sacred domain lay outside the traditional boundaries of Israel is a sure indication that his cult was not indigenous to Canaan. Edom, the probable site of the sacred mountain, is known to have been a haunt of the Kenites.

Epigraphical evidence attests that a god named Yahu was worshipped by the tribes roaming through this area. Two Egyptian inscriptions, dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE, list various territories in the Transjordan—including the land of Yahu, inhabited by nomadic raiders called the "Shasu."[3] The toponym "Yahu" corresponds to one of the forms of the divine name Yahweh, commonly found in theophoric names such as *Yirme-yahu* (Jeremiah) and *Yesha-yahu* (Isaiah). That the cult of Yahweh had roots in this region is independently corroborated by an eighth century BCE inscription at Kuntillet 'Ajrud which refers to "Yahweh of Teman," thereby associating that god with a specific district in Edom.[6]

The biblical story of Cain provides further evidence of a link between the Kenites and Israelite religion. Of particular interest is the "sign" that Yahweh places on Cain. This sign is neither purely symbolic nor a badge of shame. What is envisioned here is a physical mark—most likely an incision or tattoo on the forehead—that identifies the wearer as a devotee of Yahweh. Its explicit purpose is to ensure that "no one who came upon him would kill him" (4:15). To meet that requirement, the sign must be immediately visible and convey the message that the bearer is under the protection of the deity. Taken in context, the specific form of protection provided is clearly blood vengeance. To slay the bearer of the sign is to incur the "sevenfold vengeance" of his divine patron.

Markings of this kind are well attested in ancient accounts. Herodotus, for example, refers to tattoos used to identify fugitives who sought sanctuary in a temple of Heracles in Egypt: "if any man's slave takes refuge and has the sacred marks set upon him, giving himself over to the god, it is not lawful to lay hands upon him."[4] Lucian describes similar cultic marks worn by Syrians on the wrist or neck.[5] Insignia such as these signified more than just religious affiliation: they indicated that the bearer was the property of the god and therefore inviolate (cf. Isa 44:5).

Similar markings appear among the Israelites from an early period. Prophets, in particular, seem to have borne a distinguishing mark as a visible badge of office (Zech 13:4–6). One such mark is indirectly referenced in the story of an unknown prophet who, when commissioned to pronounce judgment on Ahab, disguised his status by placing a bandage over his forehead (1 Kgs 20:35–42). Appearing before the king, the prophet recounted what seemed to be an innocuous episode involving an escaped prisoner. But when the prophet ripped off his bandage, the king realized that the story was a parable alluding to his own forthcoming doom. The reason for this sudden enlightenment is clear: with the bandage removed, Ahab could see the mark on the prophet's forehead, identifying him as a designated spokesperson of Yahweh.

Distinguishing insignia were worn not only by Israelite prophets, but also by Israelite priests. On holy days, the high priest wore a golden rosette inscribed "Holy to Yahweh" affixed to his turban (Exod 39:30–31). Though far more abstract and ornate than the tattooed mark of Cain, this emblem likewise conveyed the idea of divine ownership.

The Levites took the custom in a different direction. Within their tradition, the mark became a token of remembrance, a reminder of Israel's common history and commitment: "Fix these words of mine in your heart and soul; bind them as a sign on your hand and tie them as frontlets on your forehead" (Deut 11:18; 6:8; cf. Exod 13:16). Taking this commandment literally, later Jews affixed a phylactery—a small box containing quotations from scripture—on their foreheads, a practice still observed by ultra-orthodox Jews today.[6]

Though the use of physical insignia lapsed over time, the basic concept was still familiar to later biblical traditionists. Ezekiel, for example, refers to a distinguishing mark, which he describes as a *tāw*, a Hebrew letter originally shaped like a cross. In a vision, the prophet sees an angel passing through Jerusalem, marking a *tāw* "on the foreheads of those who sigh and groan over the abominations being committed" (9:4). In the great slaughter that ensues, only those bearing the symbol are spared.

Under the sway of apocalyptic eschatology, the sacred mark eventually assumed a dual nature, corresponding to the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. The *Psalms of Solomon*—written in the first or second century BCE—speak of a "mark of God" which protects the righteous from "famine and sword and pestilence"; the wicked, on the other hand, bear "the mark of destruction upon their foreheads" (*Pss Sol.* 15:6–9; cf. *Apoc. Elijah* 1:9).

In a remarkable illustration of cultural persistence, the mark of Yahweh reappears in the book of Revelation—a document composed many hundreds of years after the Kenites had disappeared from history. As in other instances known from ancient texts, the mark identifies its bearers as "slaves of God" (Rev 7:3; 14:1; cf. 13:16). Even more remarkably, the ambivalent perspective of the Genesis account has been retained: those who bear the mark are at once the saved and the damned. Thus the central paradox of biblical history, already visible at its beginning, resurfaces undiminished at its conclusion.

The implications of all this are startling. By situating Cain in the primeval era, in the time before Israel's own history began, biblical tradition tacitly acknowledges his priority as a patriarch. Before Abraham was, before Jacob was, there was Cain, the original chosen of Yahweh. Salvation history begins not with a saint, but with a murderer!

It is altogether fitting that the story of Yahweh and his people should commence in this way, for that history is a history of failure—by the reckoning of prophets and priests alike (Exod 32:1–35; Ezek 20:5–26). The failure begins with Cain, continues with the Hebrew tribes, and branches out from there to innumerable derivative traditions, all equally failed. That failure is exhibited on many levels: failure to respect differences, failure to speak truthfully, failure to honor the bonds of brotherhood, failure to come to terms with their God. Yet how could it be otherwise? Given the loftiness of the goal, failure was perhaps inevitable.

That the verdict of failure applies equally to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is readily apparent. Though differing in emphasis and outward expression, these three religions all worship the same God and draw on the same fund of evolving tradition. Among other historical connections, this interrelationship is attested by the fact that Cain appears not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament and in the Quran.[7]

By extension, the same verdict would also apply to the many variations and derivations of the Abrahamic faiths: Mormons, Baha'is, Sufis, Karaites, Mandaeans, and so on. Though more distantly related, these too are branches of the family tree of Cain.

The failure does not end with overtly religious movements. Many secular ideologies have drunk from the same cup. The clearest and most important example of that cascading failure is Communism.

As a modern mass movement, Communism effectively began with the celebrated tract *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848. Its principal author, Karl Marx, can be understood as the last of the great Hebrew prophets. Like his biblical predecessors, Marx was driven by a passion for social justice and economic equity. Like them too, he rejected his religious heritage as idolatrous.

Nonetheless, as the scion of a long line of rabbis on both sides of his family, Marx retained the core assumptions of his ancestral faith, ultimately returning there to quarry the materials for his own historical scheme. Baptizing old concepts with new names, Marx identified the elect with the proletariat, the kingdom of heaven with the socialist commune, and salvation with the redistribution of wealth and privilege. Though God was replaced by dialectical materialism, history remained under the control of a hidden force guiding events towards a pre-ordained goal. After an apocalyptic class struggle, a new age of harmonious coexistence would dawn, wherein all social and economic distinctions were dissolved.

With quasi-religious zeal, Marx's disciples spread the new gospel to distant lands. Soon, however, disputes over doctrinal purity began to emerge. Within a few generations, the dynamic vision of the movement's founder was institutionalized and co-opted by a corrupt and spiritually bankrupt leadership. This is, of course, a pattern that we have seen before.

And so it is that even the Chinese—heirs to the world's oldest continuously existing civilization—have been inducted into the lineage of Cain. Today the ideological progeny of Cain are legion, found in every part of the globe. As much as three-quarters of earth's population is nominally committed to belief systems whose rudiments can be traced back to an obscure band of nomads. Without exception, all of these derivative ideologies are now irretrievably broken.

What is the basis of this universal failure? The answer lies at the beginning, in the story of Cain. Boiled down to its essence, the religion of Cain is belief in a separate destiny, of being marked as a people apart. His is the ideology of chosenness.

Those who have been chosen have been granted purpose and direction, but this gift often carries with it a predilection for divisiveness and violence. For if one group is favored, then others have been disregarded. The corrosive effects of chosenness are evident in the many sectarian disputes that have afflicted the ideological descendants of Cain. Over the last three millennia, that divisiveness has surfaced in bitter rivalries between Judah and Israel, Jew and Samaritan, Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shiite, Communist and Nazi. The inevitable result has been cultural fratricide—massacre, persecution, and war. In modern times, the consequences have escalated dramatically, with the chosen ones killing tens of millions under Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, Kony, and bin Laden.

We have now reached a point in global history where, for the sake of our common good, claims to a separate destiny can no longer be maintained. We are all chosen, or none at all.

Failure has brought us to our current impasse, but it is also the means of our salvation. For if history had proved one group right and all others wrong, then the basis for continuing exclusion and dominance would have remained intact. But if we are all equally wrong—if all our hopes and assumptions have fallen short of the truth—then nothing remains to argue about.

The ideological barriers that previously divided us into opposed cultural lineages have collapsed. We must now learn to live in a world without walls, open to light from every side.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive review of the evidence, see J. Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *JSOT* vol. 33.2 (2008), pp. 131–153.

2. See 1 Sam 15:6. The word *chesed* "lovingkindness" or "steadfastness" comes from the vocabulary of covenant-making (cf. 1 Sam 20:8, 15–16).

3. Astour, Michael C, "Yahweh in Egyptian Topographic Lists," in *Festschrift Elmar Edel* (1979), M. Gorg and E. Pusch, eds., p. 18.

4. Herodotus, *History* 2.113.1.

5. Lucian, *De Dea Syra* 59.

6. Muslims are also familiar with the idea of a mark on the forehead as a sign of religious devotion (Quran 48:29). A *zabība* "raisin" is a callus or blemish on the forehead caused by vigorous and repeated prostrations during prayer. Some Muslims have interpreted this mark as a guarantee of divine protection or elect status (e.g., *Sahi Bukhair* Vol. 9, Book 93, no. 532c).

7. Heb 11:4; 1 John 3:12; Jude 11; Quran 5:27–31. Islam has adopted a variety of traditions from Judaism and Christianity; nonetheless, it cannot be understood as a derivative form of either religion. On the contrary, Islam is the recrudescence of an ideology that is older and purer than either of its fraternal faiths. For it is not the more evolved and complicated God of the Jews or Christians who speaks in the Quran, but the straightforward, primordial God of the nomads, who has emerged from the desert once again to reassert his hold on the chosen.

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